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What works to support attendance?

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What works to support attendance?
An Appreciative Inquiry into the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance to attend secondary school.

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Abstract

Attending school plays an important role in children and young people's emotional, social and academic development (Pellegrini, 2007) and frequent non-attendance has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes (Kearney, 2016). Much of the existing literature focuses on 'the problem' of non-attendance but there is currently little known about existing strengths within school systems to support the attendance of pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance (PSNA). This thesis contributes to a clearer understanding of school-related factors that help pupils to attend secondary school. It presents findings from a qualitative research study which adopted an Appreciative Inquiry approach to explore the perceptions of seven secondary school-aged pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the factors considered to be working well to support their attendance, and their views relating to the changes they felt could be made to further enhance attendance in school. The Drawing an Ideal School task (Williams & Hanke, 2007) and scaling activities were used alongside semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' views. Thematic Analysis indicated that the factors perceived to support attendance were centred around positive relationships and positive learning experiences in school. Changes which pupils felt could be made involved those which increased feelings of comfort in school and those which enhanced positive relationships and positive learning experiences. The research makes two unique contributions to the field of PSNA in the form of a model which presents a five-component approach to creating a school environment which promotes school attendance and an audit tool which intends to provide a guide for schools to consider potential adaptations which could be made to the school environment in relation to each of the five components of the model. It is recommended that Educational Psychologist could support school attendance systemically, within groups and by working with individual pupils and staff members.

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A huge thank you to my thesis supervisor Dr John Franey, for your support, flexibility, and for helping to maintain my morale throughout the thesis process. Thank you to the rest of the tutor team at the University of Bristol, Dr Rob Green, Dr Amanda Gaulter, Dr Jak Lee and Dr Dan O'Hare for helping to ensure that I was ready to take on this challenge and for instilling the message of 'trust the process'. To my colleagues who I trained with, knowing that I have had you by my side throughout the past three years has given me such strength. I will treasure your friendship always.

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Finally, thank you to my wonderful family, friends, 'villagers' and husband Benedict for believing in me, forgiving my absences, motivating me to keep going when things were hard and filling my life with fun, adventure and happiness.

[1] Pseudonyms to provide participant confidentiality

Author’s declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: DATE: 29.08.2020.

Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Glossary of abbreviations and acronyms

AI	Appreciative Inquiry
ASC	Autistic Spectrum Condition
BPS	British Psychological Society
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Theory
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
CYP	Child and Young Person
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EHCP	Education Health Care Plan
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
LEA	Local Educational Authority
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PATH	Planning Alternative Tomorrow's with Hope
PCP	Personal Construct Psychology
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TA	Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

1.1. Chapter Overview

This thesis contributes to the current literature and understanding of Persistent School Non-Attendance (PSNA), by providing a unique insight into the perceptions of seven secondary school age pupils experiencing PSNA around school-related factors that they feel help them to attend. An Appreciate Inquiry (AI) approach has been used to explore the existing strength's within school systems to support attendance and the changes pupils feel could be made to further enhance their attendance in school.

In this chapter, the research context will be presented after which the significance of the topic and its relevance to Educational Psychology (EP) are outlined. My personal and professional experiences that led to the selection of the topic and its design will be discussed before issues relating to the conceptualisation and terminology of PSNA are considered. Finally, an overview of the national and local context, the research questions arising and the structure of the thesis will be provided.

1.2. Significance of the topic

Attending school is considered an important experience because of the significant contribution it makes to pupils' emotional, social, and academic development (Pellegrini, 2007; Kearney, 2008). It is not uncommon for pupils to experience a period of school non-attendance at some point during their education (Lauchlan, 2003). For many pupils, these absences are short and infrequent and regular attendance is quickly resumed (Elliot & Place, 2017). However, a minority of pupils' experience persisting difficulties in attending school. Frequent non-attendance has been associated with a range of short- and long-term adverse outcomes including poor academic attainment (Carroll, 2013); adult unemployment (Attwood & Croll, 2014); physical ill-health (Kearney, 2016); anxiety (Gregory & Purcell, 2014) and social and emotional difficulties (Kearney, et al 2001). Pupils who are not attending school are also considered to be at risk of exploitation, radicalisation, and becoming NEET (not in education, employment, or training) later in life (DfE, 2016).

1.3. Relevance to Educational Psychology

School non-attendance is best understood in the context of dynamic interactions between the individual pupil, their family, and the school environment. EPs work holistically and systemically to facilitate change at each of these levels (Lewis, 1995) and are therefore considered to have an important role to play in supporting attendance (BPS, 2017; Carroll, 2013). EPs have a theoretical understanding of child development, individual and group behaviour and school systems (Carroll, 2013) and have the relevant skills and experience to support school attendance in a variety of ways.

Pellegrini (2007) suggests that EPs can contribute through assessment, direct intervention, delivering whole school training, and challenging the perceptions held about pupils experiencing attendance difficulties. Much of the existing literature focuses on 'the problem' of non-attendance but there is currently little known about what is working well within school systems to support the attendance of pupils experiencing PSNA. This research is intended to provide a clearer understanding of school-related factors that help pupils to attend to inform school and EP policy and practice.

1.4. Journey toward thesis topic and design

My decision to research PSNA using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was influenced by my personal beliefs, values, and professional experiences. Before EP training, I worked as a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Practitioner. Within this role, I had regular involvement in multidisciplinary meetings for pupils experiencing attendance difficulties. I was struck by the challenges faced by those working to support school attendance and by the different professional perspectives regarding the underlying 'cause' and the feeling of helplessness experienced by parents and professionals alike, myself included, about how to create effective change.

Central to my choice of methodology were my beliefs and values relating to the importance of listening to children's voices. In practice, I have found that a powerful way to create systemic change involves eliciting pupils' views and disseminating these within the school system. During my second year of EP training, I undertook some casework with a secondary school-aged pupil who was experiencing PSNA. The pupil's observable behaviour including persistent lateness, walking out of lessons, and school absence, had been characterised by school staff as 'disruptive behaviour' and 'school-refusal'. Across several sessions, a range of person-centred activities were completed to elicit his view and school experiences. Whilst direct questioning, sorting activities, and questionnaires resulted in closed answers and disengagement, the ideal school drawing task not only provided insights into what wasn't working including experiences of neglect and bullying, but also the school-related factors which were working well such as relationships with key adults. Through consultation with school staff, it was possible to reframe the pupil's observable behaviours, make changes within the school environment, and develop an action plan relating directly to this pupil's views.

The social model of disability and systems theory have been hugely influential in my understanding of the significance of a child's environment in their learning and development. I believe that in order to create effective change it is more important to consider the systems, including schools, the child exists within, than to look inward at the child. I have been drawn to solution-orientated and strengths-based approaches finding these to enhance pupil wellbeing whilst providing an effective

starting point for intervention design. The cumulative effect of my past experiences in this area and my values, and interest in strengths-based approaches contributed to the selection of PSNA as a topic, and AI as a chosen research methodology.

1.5. Conceptualisation and Terminology

1.5.1. Within child vs systemic

The terminology used to describe pupils who experience difficulties attending school is wide-ranging and extensively debated within the literature (Heyne et al, 2019; Kearney, 2008). The terms selected by authors and their chosen definitions can provide insight into their conceptualisation of the phenomenon. Early literature refers to "Neurotic refusal" (Jung, 1913) indicating conceptualisation of the 'problem' existing within the child. "School phobia" was coined in 1941 and defined as a fear of school caused by separation anxiety between child and mother (Johnson et al, 1941). Although the role of systemic factors on non-attendance have since been acknowledged, it could be argued that contemporary terms including "emotionally based school refusal" (West Sussex County Council, EPS, 2004) and "school refusal behaviour" (Havik et al, 2014; Kearney, 2007) have contributed to the continued discourse and subsequent perspective that school non-attendance is caused by individuals and families.

In an attempt to move away from this within-child perspective, some authors have adopted neutral terms, such as "problematic absenteeism" (Green-Landell, 2015), "chronic non-attendance" (Lauchlan, 2003), "school attendance problems" (Finning et al, 2019) and "extended school non-attendance" (Pellegrini, 2007). Despite this movement towards a systemic and interactionalist perspective of non-attendance, "school refusal behaviour" has remained a prominent choice of terminology over the past decade (Grandison, 2011; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

1.5.2. Distinct categories or spectrum?

Researchers and practitioners frequently divide pupils into two broad categories based upon internalizing and externalising behaviour distinctions (Young et al, 1990). Pupils whose school non-attendance is felt to be associated with emotional difficulties such as anxiety, sadness or distress (i.e. school refuser) (Elliott & Place, 2017) are categorised as separate from those who are considered to avoid school due to a lack of interest or engagement in education or to defy authority (i.e. truants).

Some researchers argue that it is important to distinguish between truancy and school refusal (McShane et al, 2001; Shilvock, 2010). However, making such a distinction has been criticised as being reductionist, furthermore, it has been argued that these terms are not mutually exclusive (Egger et al, 2003). Numerous studies have highlighted considerable heterogeneity both within and

across these constructs (Ingles et al, 2015; Maynard et al, 2018) and several large-scale meta-analyses have demonstrated extensive overlap between internalising and externalising behaviour (Egger et al, 2003; Finning et al, 2019) finding "truancy" to be strongly associated with internalising problems such as anxiety (Gase et al, 2014).

Grouping pupils who experience school non-attendance into subtypes could be argued to lack empirical support and can lead to inaccurate assumptions being made about the underlying aetiology of this phenomenon (Finning et al, 2019). In practice, this may result in pupils with similar underlying needs being treated inconsistently (Tobias, 2019). For example, truancy is often viewed less sympathetically than emotionally based school refusal by school staff and the interventions associated with truancy are more likely to be punitive rather than therapeutic (Armstrong et al, 2011). Thambirajah et al (2008) suggest that a more helpful way of viewing non-attendance is on a continuum from reluctance to attend through to complete refusal. With 'school refusal' occurring when risks are greater than resilience, stress exceeds support, and 'pull' factors which promote non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors encouraging this (Thambirajah, et al, 2008).

1.5.3. Are these labels helpful?

Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) considered the impact of labelling children and young people (CYP) and concluded that this can be helpful where it contributes to a shared understanding of their needs or increases access to resources. Labelling was, however, deemed unhelpful when it contributed to a lack of understanding of individual needs or resulted in a within-child focus, stigmatisation or lowered adults' expectations of the CYP. Terms such as "refuser" or "truant" may imply choice or control by the pupil and lead to a within-child focus, deflecting away from environmental or other systemic factors that may be central to understanding and addressing the phenomenon (Pellegrini, 2007). Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985) proposes that we try to understand why people do what they do by interpreting behaviour we see as intentional to an internal or external cause. By attributing non-school attendance to within-child factors, those working to support attendance may lack the locus of control required to effect positive change.

1.5.4. Why persistent school non-attendance?

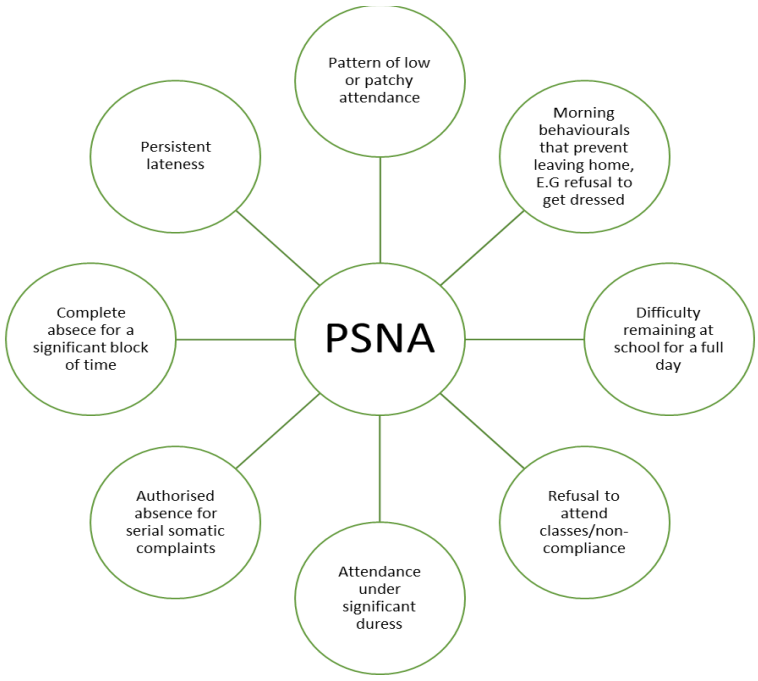
I align myself with the perspective that school non-attendance can be understood in the context of complex interactions between a child, their family, and their environment. For this reason, I feel that it is important to use language relating to non-attendance that moves away from locating the 'problem' within the child. Previous EPs such as those working for the West Sussex County Council EPS (2004) selected terminology which recognises the significance of emotions within school non-attendance, adopting the term "Emotionally Based School refusal". Whilst I value the focus on

emotions rather than behaviour, I believe that the use of terminology that continues to draw distinctions between different 'subtypes' of non-attendance conceals the increasingly complex and idiosyncratic range of factors that influence school attendance. Additionally, since this thesis focuses specifically upon school-related factors that motivate pupils to attend, the underlying aetiology of the phenomena is not an area of consideration.

For the reasons outlined above, definitions that describe school non-attendance using neutral terminology were considered for use, including Pellegrini's (2007) definition of "extended school non-attendance". However, it was felt that the word 'extended' implied a focus upon pupils who had not attended the school over a lengthy period. As the present research aimed to capture the perspectives of pupils experiencing a broad spectrum of attendance issues, including those who find it difficult to stay in school for the whole day but who do attend regularly, this term was deemed unsuitable.

The terminology and definition of "Persistent School Non-Attendance" (PSNA) as outlined by Tobias (2019) as shown in Figure 1 were selected as they include a broad spectrum of non-attendance experiences, incorporating not just pupils who are absent for extended or chronic periods of time but also those whose attendance fluctuates. The word 'school' was considered important within this definition as it directs attention toward the school environment as opposed to within the child to understand the phenomenon. The term "persistent school non-attendance" will be used throughout this thesis; different terms used to describe non-attendance will be used only when directly quoted within the literature, or in reference to the literature which employs them.

Figure 1: The range of behaviours noted in PSNA as taken from Tobias (2019)



1.6. National and local context

1.6.1. National context

In the UK, pupils have a right and a legal obligation to attend school between the ages of five and sixteen (Education, Act, 1996; United Nations, 1989). The responsibility for ensuring good attendance is shared by parents, schools, and Local Authorities (LAs). Section 7 of the Education Act (1996) states that parents are legally responsible for ensuring their child's attendance at school (Education Act, 1996). LAs and schools are required to ensure that pupils have access to full-time education, that good attendance is promoted and patterns of absence are recognised and responded to promptly (DfE, 2016). However, the changing socio-political climate in the UK and the School Funding Reform (DfE, 2011) have resulted in a reduction in LA attendance support and consequently, schools hold greater responsibility for ensuring good attendance. Within this context, it seems important to understand pupils' perceptions of school-related factors that they feel support their attendance, in order to help inform policy and practice.

1.6.2. Prevalence of PSNA

The prevalence of PSNA is difficult to ascertain due to differences within the conceptualisation and terminology used to define school non-attendance and inconsistencies in the tracking and recording measures used by schools and LAs (Thambirajah et al, 2008). The Department for Education (DfE, 2020b) published the following national statistics for the year 2018-2019:

- Overall absence in secondary school =5.5%. Unauthorised absence 1.8%.
- Pupils in years 10 and 11 had the highest rates of 'persistent absence' (defined by the DfE as pupils who miss 10% or more of available school sessions).
- Boys had slightly higher persistent absence rates than girls (11.1% compared with 10.6%).
- Pupils claiming free school meals were over twice as likely to be persistently absent (22.8% compared to 8.3%).
- Pupils with EHCPs were over twice as likely to be persistently absent than those with no identified SEN (24.6% compared with 9%).
- The highest persistent absence rates were in traveller or Irish Heritage and Gypsy/Roma pupils (16.5% and 14.5% respectively).

National statistics based upon attendance codes, however, may be unreliable measures of pupil absence as the classification of 'authorised' or 'unauthorised' are made at the discretion of school staff (Malcolm et al, 2003). Additionally, Kearney (2008) suggests that attendance codes may not capture the heterogeneity and complexities of 'school refusal behaviour' due to the limited coding range available. It is therefore important that these statistics are considered with caution.

1.6.3. COVID 19 pandemic

The data for this research was collected before the school closures and restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the national context at the time of writing this thesis cannot be overlooked since it is impacting significantly on school attendance. Since March 2020 when the outbreak in the UK was increasing, the majority of pupils have been experiencing an extended period of non-attendance caused by school closures and social distancing regulations. At this time government guidelines have stated that parents will not be penalised or sanctioned for their child's non-attendance. However, it is highly likely that full-time attendance will become mandatory from September 2020 with legal responses resuming. Schools are being encouraged to identify pupils who are reluctant or anxious about returning to school or at risk of disengagement and develop plans to support re-engagement (DfE, 2020a). It seems reasonable to suggest that research that contributes to an understanding of school-related factors that can support attendance is particularly pertinent at present.

1.6.4. Local context

This research took place in one LA in the South West of England. A joint local area SEND inspection for this LA in 2019 highlighted attendance as being a local concern with attendance for pupils with SEND reported as 'not good enough' and persistent absence 'too high, especially in mainstream schools' (DfE, 2020b). Participants were recruited from three mainstream secondary schools. All three schools had persistent non-attendance ratings above the national average in the year 2018/19 with Ivoryway recording the highest ratings. A summary of information from the most recent Ofsted report concerning attendance from each school can be found within the school profile section of the Methodology Chapter in table 4.

1.7. Research Questions

This research aims to appreciate what is already working within school systems regarding attendance, by exploring the factors which support pupil experiencing PSNA to attend secondary school. The research also aims to instigate positive change within schools by listening to pupils' voices about changes that they feel could be made within the school environment to help increase attendance. It is anticipated that this research will provide recommendations for future research, information to secondary school settings, and Educational Psychology Services (EPS) regarding how to support pupils who experience PSNA.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute towards their attendance?

2. What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to help increase school attendance?
3. What can we learn from the experiences of these pupils to help guide school and EP policy and practice?

1.8. Structure of the thesis

The research has been divided into seven chapters to bring clarity and support the navigation of the reader. An overview is outlined in table 1:

Chapter		Content
2	**Literature Review**	Chapter 2 critically reviews the literature most relevant to the aims of this study focusing on factors perceived as being associated with PSNA, pupils' lived experiences of PNSA and factors considered to support school attendance.
3	**Methodology**	Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research aims, philosophical and methodological approaches, research design, data collection, data analysis methods and ethical considerations.
4	**Findings and Discussion**	Chapter 4 presents and discusses the research findings from each research question in turn. The superordinate and subordinate themes are described and supported by quotes from participants and the findings are considered with reference to previous literature. The product of the research is then presented in the form of a model and an audit tool and the implications of the research are outlined.
5	**Conclusion**	Chapter 5 concludes the research, a research summary is provided, strengths and limitations are explored, future directions are considered and research quality is evaluated.
6	**References**	References are presented in Chapter 6
7	**Appendices**	Appendices are presented in Chapter 7

Table 1: Thesis structure

2. Literature Review

2.1. Aims of the review

As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, the present study aims to appreciate the strengths within school systems regarding attendance by exploring what helps pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance (PSNA) to attend secondary school. In addition, the research seeks to listen to pupils' views about changes they feel could be made to the school environment to help increase attendance. As an interpretivist researcher, the purpose of this literature review is to generate understanding rather than accumulate knowledge (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, a narrative approach has been selected to gain an initial impression of the topic of PNSA, which I intend to further understand through my research. Because narrative reviews have been criticised for lacking detail and clarity (Bryman, 2016) I have chosen to incorporate several of the measures typically adopted within a systematic literature review. For example, a literature research strategy and inclusion and exclusion criteria are included to provide transparency and can be found in Appendix A.

The majority of research in the field of school PSNA is based upon quantitative data but research that considers the phenomenon from the perspectives of those most concerned is scarce in comparison. With this in mind, and guided by both the philosophical underpinnings of this research and my understanding of PSNA as being a socially constructed phenomenon, this review focuses on the literature pertaining to the perspectives of pupils, parents and professionals in relation to PSNA.

This chapter will critically consider the relevant literature using the following questions to structure the review:

- What do we understand about PSNA from the perspective of those most concerned?
- What factors are perceived as being associated with PSNA
- What are pupils lived experiences of PSNA?
- How can we support pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school?

2.2. What do we understand about PSNA from the perspectives of those most concerned?

The literature pertaining to PSNA from the perceptions of pupils, parents and professionals can be broadly conceptualised within three categories: perceived factors associated with PSNA, the lived experience of PSNA and factors perceived to improve school attendance. Within this chapter, each of these areas will be explored in turn, with reference to key concepts within psychology, before the unique contribution of this research is presented.

As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, a range of terminology is used to describe pupils who experience difficulties attending school. This presents several challenges when attempting to critically review the literature. The terms used to describe non-attendance are used inconsistently and without precision (Elliot, 1999). With such diversity in terminology and definitions, it can be argued that we lack a shared understanding of this phenomenon. With authors holding different constructs around what they consider school non-attendance to be, it seems important to be aware when evaluating research findings that they may not be referring to the same thing. In addition, the meaning of authors chosen terminology around 'non-attendance' may not be shared by the pupils, parents or professionals, adding further complications when interpreting their views.

Research which focuses on just one or several of the previously described categories of non-attendance (e.g. truancy) are all deemed relevant for exploration within this literature review. Selecting the term PSNA and the associated broad definition of this within the current thesis enables a critical consideration of the literature and avoids complexities such as those described by Lyon and Colter (2007). It should, however, be noted that the broader populations that would be included within the definition of PSNA, such as those who continue to attend school but who find it difficult to remain in school for a full day, may not be represented in earlier research.

It is also important to acknowledge the biases that exist within this field due to the populations most frequently studied (Lyon & Colter, 2007). Led by early conceptualisations of the aetiology of school non-attendance as existing within individual pupils, the literature on this topic has previously been dominated by medicalised perspectives with a focus on individual risk factors and 'treatment' approaches to improve pupils' attendance in schools. Many studies have recruited from clinical settings, requiring participants to have diagnosable anxiety or co-morbid anxiety and depression (Kearney et al, 2016). Findings from studies in which non-clinical populations have been recruited suggest that 'clinically significant' anxiety Is not commonly linked with school non-attendance (Egger et al, 2003). Finally, pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans are more than twice as likely to be 'persistently absent' from school compared to pupils with no identified special education needs (DfE, 2020b). This means that some populations are likely to be underrepresented within the literature.

2.3. What factors are perceived as being associated with PSNA?

Driven by a desire to design effective interventions to increase school attendance, a wealth of research has been undertaken aimed at understanding why pupils experience difficulties attending school. Several large-scale research projects have utilized surveys and interviews with a combination of pupils, parents and professionals to explore the causes of PSNA from a variety of perspectives (Archer et al, 2003; Attwood & Croll, 2015; Havik et al, 2014; Malcolm et al, 2003). Additionally,

smaller-scale qualitative studies have been conducted from one or multiple perspectives in an attempt to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon, for example, but not limited to: Archer et al, 2003, Finning et al, 2019 and Wilson et al, 2008.

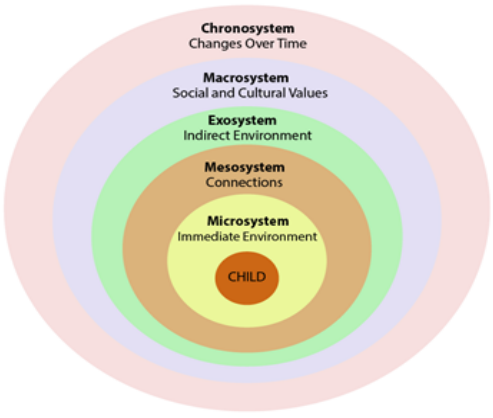
The following section will summarise and critically consider research findings concerning the factors perceived to be associated with PSNA. In keeping with previous literature, these risk factors have been categorised within three broad domains relating to the individual, families and school (i.e. Finning et al, 2019). However, it is important to note that although presented separately for ease of reading, these factors are best understood within the context of a dynamic interactionist perspective which will now be outlined.

2.3.1. An Interactionist perspective

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggests that children's development takes place within the interactions between themselves and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within the context of PSNA, an interactionist perspective has been proposed as a way to both understand the phenomenon and design effective interventions to support pupils return to school (Place et al, 2000). This perspective sees a reciprocal link between pupils and their environment (Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Thambirajah et al, 2008). As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, early conceptualisations of PSNA have centred around within child perspectives whereby diagnostic interviews and assessment scales were used to 'measure' the phenomenon (Pellegrini, 2007). An interactionist perspective shifts the emphasis from within the pupil, to see the development and maintenance of PSNA as resulting from the interactions taking place between pupil, family and school. With this in mind, the perspectives of pupils, families and professionals who create the school environment when attempting to understand PSNA are paramount.

REVELVANT KEY CONTRSTUCTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY I: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The Ecological System's Theory was formulated to explain how the qualities inherent to children interact with their environment as they develop. The theory emphasises the importance of viewing children within multiple environments, or ecological systems. In relation to school attendance these may involve the intimate family system, the school system and broader systems such as society and culture. The theory proposes that each of these ecological systems interact and influence each other within all aspects of children's lives.



2.3.2. Individual pupil factors

Research exploring the factors related to PSNA from the perspectives of pupils, families and professionals highlight a wide variety of perceived risk factors including low self-esteem (Archer et al, 2003), special educational needs (Havik et al, 2015), laziness (Malcolm et al, 2003) and drug and alcohol use (Gase et al, 2014). However, a key theme within the literature pertains to pupils' experiences of somatic symptoms (i.e. nausea and stomach ache) and anxiety.

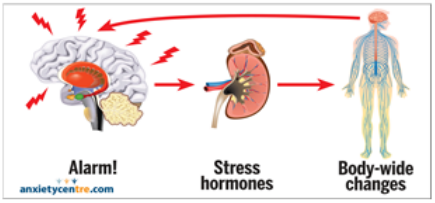
Havik et al, (2015) conducted a large-scale self-report survey of 5,465 secondary school-aged pupils in Norway to assess the reasons for non-attendance. Individual pupil factors including subjective health complaints and somatic symptoms comprised the most commonly reported reasons and the authors concluded that more attention should be paid to this type of non-attendance. Participants in this research were required to answer 17 pre-determined questions about the reasons for their non-attendance by ticking 'never', 'seldom', 'sometimes' and 'quite often' regarding how frequently these applied over the past year. It could be argued that the complexity of pupils' views and experiences may be suppressed when required to tick just one box in a survey.

Parental perspectives of their child's non-attendance also reveal physical symptoms as an underlying cause (Dannow et al, 2018; Wallace, 2017). Parents in these studies were interviewed using semi-structured interviews which, unlike participants in Havik et al (2014), provided the opportunity for their individual experiences to be explored. However, neither study was conducted in the UK and so their findings may not be relevant within a UK setting due to demographic differences between the USA, Demark and the UK. For example, Wallace's (2017) used purposeful sampling to recruit 22 parents and guardians of African American pupils as this population was felt to be most at risk of PSNA in the USA. In the UK, Travellers of Irish Heritage and Gypsy/Roma pupils have the highest absence rates (DfE, 2020b).

Interviews with pupils reveal that some may tell their parents they feel ill to mask a lack of motivation to attend lessons (Beckles, 2014) or to avoid bullying (Malcom et al, 2003), illuminating the importance of gaining pupils' authentic voice in this area. It could be argued that rather than being the 'cause' of PSNA, somatic symptoms may be experienced as a secondary physiological response to feelings of anxiety (see key constructs from psychology II). Families have noticed that patterns of somatic symptoms are linked to certain times of the day and that symptoms reduce when pupils are allowed home, which appears to support this hypothesis (Dannow et al, 2018). From an interactionist perspective, anxiety may best be understood as resulting from complex interactions between various systems around pupils as described in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

REVELVANT KEY CONTRSTUCTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY II: The Stress Response and anxiety

Perceived threats (including fearful, ***anxious*** and distressing thoughts) activate the bodies stress response Bear et al, 2016). This secretes hormones into the bloodstream where they travel to targeted areas to bring about specific emotional, psychological and physiological changes which enhance the body's ability to manage the threat. The sympathetic nervous system is activated which in turn leads to body-wide changes including:



- Heightened senses
- Increased urgency to escape
- Increased respiration
- Elevated heart rate
- Inhibition of the digestive system
- Tightening of the abdominal muscles.

In relation to PSNA, perceived threats may include a range of individual, family or school related factors (i.e. bullying, exam pressure, parental divorce). Leading to the activation of the sympathetic nervous system and subsequent physiological changes including somatic symptoms such as nausea.

Researchers seeking to understand how pupils make sense of their experiences of PSNA have used qualitative approaches to explore the reasons for PSNA. Baker and Bishop (2015) utilized semi-structured interviews to explore pupils' views and found that each participant held a unique perception of the reasons for their PSNA. Contributing factors included bullying, depression, social isolation and fatigue, however, all four participants refer to experiences of anxiety, sharing that they felt "really scared" and "sick" at the thought of school (Baker & Bishop, 2015, p360-361). Findings from Clissold (2018) highlight the differing perceptions regarding whether anxiety is constructed as a precipitating or perpetuating factor of PSNA. In this study, unstructured interviews were conducted with three pupils to gain insights into anxiety in relation to PSNA. These pupils, however, had involvement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services as did the pupils in Baker and Bishop's (2015) research and for this reason the findings from both studies should be considered with caution as the participants may represent a narrow population of those experiencing PSNA.

Studies which sought school or Local Educational Authority (LEA) staff perspectives of individual factors related to PSNA, highlight physical health, SEN, a lack of enthusiasm about education, behavioural problems and lack of resilience as contributing factors (Finning et al, 2019; Reid, 2008). Finning et al (2019) conducted focus groups with 16 practitioners from three secondary schools to explore their beliefs about the risk factors for PSNA. Staff in this study felt that anxiety had a particularly significant role to play in non-attendance. The conclusions from this study suggest that although anxiety is reduced by not attending school in the short term, over time this results in increased levels of anxiety, creating a vicious cycle. This hypothesis can be understood within the context of 'avoidance behaviour' as described within Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Hofmann & Hay, 2019) as outlined in 'relevant key constructs from psychology III'.

REVELVANT KEY CONTRSTUCTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY III: Cognitive Behavioural Theory

Cognitive-Behavioural Theories (CBT) are those which draw upon both behavioural and cognitively oriented approaches in order to understand human beings. In relation to school non-attendance, CBT perspectives are based upon the assumption that anxiety is caused by an individual's 'faulty' cognitive processing (Elliott, 1999). The pupil perceives an aspect of the school environment as threatening (***cognition***), this may active the fight, flight or freeze response which causes a surge of anxiety and the pupil may believe that they cannot manage the situation. 'Avoidance behaviour' refers to the pupil leaving school or staying at home in order to avoid the situation (***behaviour***) causing their anxiety to reduce, which in turn negatively reinforces their non-attendance behaviour (Lee, 2019).

Summary of individual factors

This section explored research findings in relation to the perceived risk factors for PSNA at the individual child level. Within the literature reviewed above, it is possible to focus in on several key points. Firstly, PSNA has been associated with somatic symptoms and anxiety from the pupil, parent and professional perspective. Secondly, there is a lack of consensus as to whether these factors are underlying risks of PSNA or the response to interactions between the individual child and other factors in their environment. Finally, whatever the nature of pupils' anxiety, it is possible that this can further perpetuate PSNA through avoidance behaviour. The role of anxiety is a prominent theme within the literature in this field, whilst CBT approaches may help understand the interaction between anxiety and PSNA, interventions based solely upon this perspective are likely to be within-child in nature (i.e. focused upon pupils' 'faulty' processing) and may lead to the conceptualisation of PSNA as sitting within the domain of specialist mental health services which may lead to parents and professionals feeling disempowered in their ability to create effective change. By taking a systemic approach (i.e. promoting feelings of safety in school through policies or nurturing spaces) some of the underlying issues causing anxious feelings may be addressed directly. This approach may also create systemic change which could benefit multiple pupils in school.

2.3.3. Family factors

The early conceptualisation of PSNA as originating from separation anxiety, have contributed to a focus on the role of family factors within the literature. School staff and LEA members frequently perceive family-related factors as being the primary 'cause' of PSNA. Factors such as separation anxiety, bereavement, family conflict, caring responsibilities and poverty have all been linked with non-attendance from a professional perspective (Archer et al, 2003).

Archer et al (2003) conducted a multi-method research project involving questionnaire surveys with 280 schools and interviews with school staff, LEA representatives, professionals from other agencies and pupils. The main 'causes' of PSNA were considered to include social anxiety, a fear of the school

environment and a change of pupil groupings. Despite the majority of these factors being school-related, the authors claim that whilst school factors may trigger school non-attendance, 'the origins of the problem usually lay in the home' (Archer et al, 2003 p.26). Although this paper appears to present a range of views and perspectives, in reality, the research focuses significantly on the views of school staff. The authors explain that interview data was collected by school staff, families and 'where possible the children themselves' (Archer et al, 2003 p3) suggesting a lack of importance placed upon collecting pupil views. Unsurprisingly, their voices are significantly underrepresented within the presentation of findings. Therefore, the conclusions drawn regarding the 'causes' of PSNA and the subsequent recommendations to LEAs and school staff are, in the majority, based upon professionals' interpretations of pupil experiences.

Malcolm et al (2003) conducted a 12-month study in which they aimed to understand the 'causes' of PNSA from a variety of different perspectives. Interviews were conducted with 523 secondary school pupils and 143 educational professionals, whilst 373 parents completed questionnaires. The report presented pupil views in distinct sections bringing clarity and placing an importance on child's voice. In keeping with findings by Archer et al (2003), whilst the impact of school factors were acknowledged, most LEA representatives and teachers felt that home factors such as 'disorganised lifestyles', 'poverty' and 'inadequate parenting' contributed toward PSNA. These terms, however, are subjective and relationships held between staff and families likely influence their perceptions which may lead to bias.

In contrast to professional views, the literature suggests that pupils and parents themselves do not consider factors relating to the home and family as being the most significant contributors to PSNA. Just 4 of the 523 secondary school participants sampled by Malcolm et al (2003), cited family factors as a reason for their PSNA. These responses included 'parental separation' and 'staying home with parental permission for social events'. This illuminates a polarized position between the perspectives of pupils and school staff.

Summary of family factors

A clear divide exists within the literature pertaining to the involvement of family factors within PSNA. Whilst professionals view family factors as being the 'root cause' of PSNA, pupils and parents themselves do not. Archer's (2003) research was commissioned by the Local Government Association and therefore likely had wide a reach in terms of research impact. This may have contributed to a continued discourse surrounding the focus of family-factors within PSNA, impacting upon subsequent intervention design. By focusing on individual child or family factors, school-related factors may be minimised or ignored. The next section will go on to describe research which highlights the role of school-related factors within PSNA.

2.3.4. School Factors

Several large-scale studies highlight the link between school-related factors and PSNA. As described above, pupils and parents in Malcolm et al (2003) did not view family factors as being the main 'cause' of PSNA. Instead, school-related factors such as problems with teachers, bullying and peer-pressure to avoid school were perceived as 'causing' PSNA. These findings are supported by a more recent longitudinal survey by Attwood & Croll (2015) where pupils aged 13-14 years reported the main reasons for PSNA as being related to boredom, and the dislike of school, teachers and lessons. Participants in both studies were defined as "truants" and therefore may not be representative of the population sought within the present research. Furthermore, the definition of truancy provided by Malcolm et al (2003) specified absences that pupils felt would be "*unacceptable to teachers"* which could be considered subjective. The link between PSNA and school-related factors has however been identified within a multitude of other studies which explore pupils' individual experiences of the phenomenon (i.e. Beckles, 2014; Grandison, 2011; How, 2015). These will now be critically considered.

Curriculum and academic demands

Findings from research which explored pupils' perceptions and experiences of PSNA illustrates the impact of academic and curriculum demands upon attendance (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gase et al, 2014). Beckles (2014) interviewed 12 pupils to gain insights into the early stages of non-attendance. The main reason for their PSNA was perceived as being a lack of motivation to attend lessons which pupils didn't understand or enjoy. This finding was echoed by Gase et al (2014) who interviewed 39 "youths" to explore the factors perceived to contribute to decisions not to attend. Participants said that they were more likely to 'skip' or 'ditch' when they found the curriculum boring, irrelevant or too difficult. Whilst participants in Gase et al (2014) were all considered "truants", participants who had engaged in truanting were excluded in Beckles (2014) indicating consistency in findings between these proposed sub-categories of non-attendance.

Two key themes emerge from this research; the enjoyment of lessons and the perceived level of difficulty. Lesson enjoyment has been linked with teaching style and approaches, with pupils reporting that they are less likely to attend lessons led by teachers who shout, get angry, are impersonal or not engaging (Gase et al, 2014; Malcolm et al, 2003). Being asked to contribute to lessons in a way which makes pupils feel uncomfortable is also considered to impact upon perceived enjoyment. For example, in Havik et al (2014) study parents reported that being asked to present in front of others or read aloud, caused pupils to feel anxious, resulting in PSNA. The use of open-ended questions within semi-structured interviews with 17 parents within Havik et al's (2014) research created scope for authentic parental voice to be captured. However, without having

observed lessons themselves, parents may not be aware of additional contributing factors which led to pupils feeling anxious in such situations.

Lesson difficulty has been linked with lesson pace and support to meet individual needs. Pupils in Beckles (2014) shared that they were less likely to understand the lesson content or complete activities when presented with short time-frames by teachers. Parents in Havik et al's (2014) expressed concerns that pupils did not receive adequate support until they were experiencing attendance difficulties. These findings were extended by Clissold (2018) who emphasised the negative cumulative impact of unmet needs upon academic expectations, suggesting that the lack of adequate support and the delay in its provision 'contributed significantly' to non-attendance (Clissold, 2018, p120). This research included a sample of just three participants and sought to understand their individual constructions regarding the reasons for their PSNA and therefore conclusions are not intended to be generalised. However, these findings are triangulated with studies from other pupils, parental and professional perspectives enhancing their credibility (i.e. Archer et al, 2003; Beckles, 2014l; Dalziel & Henthorne, 2005; Finning et al, 2019) and can be understood in terms of the 'Vicious Cycle of School Refusal' whereby a lack of support can lead to a cycle of fear and avoidance (Thambirajah et al, 2008).

The academic stress caused by high workloads and exam pressure has been identified as a contributing factor toward PSNA by pupils and parents (Clissold, 2018; Dannow et al, 2018; Havik et al, 2014). Pupils have linked PSNA to feeling overwhelmed by homework quantity (Dannow et al, 2018), however, participants in Beckles (2014) described home circumstances such as ill parents impacting upon their ability to complete homework, emphasising again the interlinked nature of contributory factors to PSNA. Secondary school practitioners have acknowledged the impact of academic stress, particularly during exam periods on PSNA (Malcolm et al, 2003; Finning et al, 2019; Reid, 2008), however, staff in these studies tend to highlight the curriculum as being 'unsuitable' for some pupils, rather than consider factors which may be within their control such as levels of pastoral support. School staff in Finning et al's (2019) study suggested that expanding the curriculum to include vocational courses may increase attendance, however, they perceived there to be barriers to making such changes, highlighting the need for strong teacher efficacy to be embedded in the school culture if pupils experiencing PSNA are to be effectively supported.

School environment and routine

Pupils, parents and school staff have also identified the structural organisation of school as contributing toward PSNA, including large schools, long school days, and large, noisy or disorganised classes (Archer et al, 2003). Staff in Archer et al (2003) suggest that school layout and size may

increase pupil's anxiety about moving around the school, going to specific areas such as canteens and coping with long crowded corridors. Taken at face value, these factors have been described as a 'condition for children in public schools' (Dannow et al, 2018, p33) and may be perceived as fixed and potentially unchangeable aspects of the school environment. Nonetheless, parents and pupils have suggested that these factors impact upon feelings of safety (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gase et al, 2014; Havik et al, 2014,) and therefore interventions aimed to increase feelings of security in school may support the attendance of pupils faced with these environmental factors.

Parents and school staff have flagged unpredictability in the learning environment such as changes to the school day, setting or structure as contributing factors to PSNA (Archer et al, 2003; Dannow et al, 2018). Many secondary school environments are of stark contrast to the often small, nurturing environment of a primary school and the unpredictability related to key transition points in large schools have been linked to an increased risk of PSNA (Clissold, 2018; Finnings et al, 2019; Malcolm et al, 2003). Baker and Bishop (2015) found that PSNA began for all four of the participants in their study shortly after a transition or time out of school. However, for these participants, it was the impact of transition upon their social relationships rather than the change in the environment itself that led to PSNA with pupils reporting that they didn't 'fit' into their new schools and that they were being bullied 'in the first two weeks' (Baker & Bishop, 2015, p360).

Teacher-Pupil relationships

Relationships between pupils and key adults in school have been identified as an important factor regarding attendance, with poor pupil-teacher relationships being linked with PSNA by pupils, parents and school staff (Archer, 2003; Attwood & Croll, 2015; Gase et al, 2014). Pupils in Gase et al (2014) reported that they felt less welcome in classes where negative relationships had been established with teachers and saw this as a catalyst to PSNA, highlighting the importance of teachers' demonstrating genuine interest in pupils. Good classroom management, caring for pupils and providing emotional and social support have been identified as protective factors for PSNA (Havik et al, 2015). However, pupils in a study by Dannow et al (2018) continued to experience difficulties with attendance despite positive relationships with teachers, suggesting that this alone may not be enough to support attendance. All of the three participants interviewed in this research were male and it is possible that gender differences impact on the experience of PSNA and the interventions perceived as helpful. The multi-faceted nature of these findings lend support to an interactionist approach for understanding the phenomenon of PSNA.

Feeling as though they are being treated fairly by teachers has been seen as important to pupils (Attwood & Croll, 2015). Pupils report that fearing repercussion for missed homework and trying to avoid getting into trouble can contribute toward PSNA (Beckles 2014; Malcom et al 2003). Parents in

Havik et al (2014) suggested that harsh or unfair punishments and aggressive reactions from teachers led to pupils feeling insecure, anxious and unsafe, suggesting that pupils require predictability within both the learning environment and their relationships if PSNA is to be tackled effectively.

Peer relationships

The link between non-school attendance and peer relationships is also well documented in the literature. Egger et al (2003) conducted a large-scale project involving structured interviews with 1,422, 9-16-year old's and their parents. Their findings suggest that non-attenders found it more difficult to make and keep friends than their attending peers. This participant sample included some primary aged pupils and is therefore not completely representative of the population studied in the present research. More recently, these findings were supported by Dannow et al (2018), who found that secondary school-aged pupils experiencing PSNA, found it difficult to talk to other peers or make friends. These researchers propose that having few friends in lessons; an absence of social support from peers and experiencing friendships growing apart can give rise to feelings of a lack of belonging and connectedness to school.

Having few friends or not feeling valued by peers in school was also perceived by parents to contribute to their children's PSNA (Havik et al, 2014). Parents in Malcolm et al (2003) saw the main cause of their children's "truancy" to be related to peer-pressure to stay away from school. Pupils in the same study reported feeling lonely and isolated due to feelings of not fitting in (Malcom et al, 2003). This may indicate that pupils who do not feel they belong in school, are motivated toward PSNA to spend time with peers that they do feel connected to, outside of school (see relevant key constructs from psychology IV). However, Gregory and Purcell (2014) who conducted semi-structured interviews with three pupils and their parents found that whilst all participants reported limited social interaction with peers in school, compensatory ways of interacting by, for example, using social media helped participants to remain connected with their peer groups. This research highlights the important role that social media can play in facilitating a sense of belonging for pupils who are not attending school.

REVELVANT KEY CONTRSTUCTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY IV: School Belonging

Belongingness is considered to be a basic human need (Maslow, 1943). The theoretical basis of this relates to the belongingness hypothesis which states that human beings 'have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships' (Baumeiseter & Leary, 1997, p.497). Maslow describes the motivation to belong as being linked with the connection gained through the establishment of genuine relationships with family, friends, social groups and community.

Within educational contexts, researchers emphasise the importance of caring school environments which facilitate a sense of community and a feeling of belongingness among students (Allen et al, 2018). School belonging can be understood as being 'the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school environment' (Goodenow, 1993, p80).

Bullying

As discussed above, the school environment has been causally linked with unsafe feelings in school for some pupils (Havik et al, 2015). In particular, fighting and bullying are considered to create a dangerous school environment. For some, bullying has a direct impact upon attendance as described by a pupil in Gase et al (2014) who shared that due to bullying he 'couldn't take it anymore' and stopped attending (p310). In their seminal text, Thambirajah et al (2008) suggest that bullying is the most common factor to contribute to PSNA. This assertion is supported by a wealth of findings that link bullying directly with PSNA in secondary school pupils (i.e. Attwood & Croll, 2015; Ingul et al, 2019; Malcolm et al, 2003; Gase et al, 2014; Wallace, 2017). The full extent of the impact of bullying on attendance cannot be fully understood or measured as those who are bullied may not always share their experiences, leaving them to suffer in silence (Thambirajah et al, 2008). This may be due to pupils' lack of trust in school systems, a supposition which is supported by pupils' perceptions in Beckles (2014) qualitative study, who reported that they did not feel believed by staff and felt that no action was taken following disclosures of bullying.

More recent research by Clissold (2018) found that both interpersonal and online cyberbullying were perceived by pupils as contributory factors to PSNA. With increased access to technology and a rise in the use of social media amongst secondary school-aged pupils, cyberbullying is likely an increasing problem. This assumption is supported by recent research by Finning et al (2019) in which school staff suggest that social media 'prevents some pupils being able to escape from difficult social relationships' (Finnings et al, 2019 p8). It seems therefore that the function of social media is both a protective factor (as described previously) and a risk factor for PSNA.

Fearing continued bullying on a return to school is also felt to impact upon transition back into school following PSNA (How, 2015). In this study, five year eleven pupils were interviewed about their lived experiences of non-attendance. Pupils in this study felt that bullying would always be present in school regardless of any efforts to prevent it, indicating that pupils may feel helpless in

the face of such an important school-wide issue. Grandison (2011) interviewed five pupils who had integrated back into mainstream school following a period at a short stay school for pupils with mental and physical health needs. Pupils in this study spoke of the traumatic impact of bullying and described this as a primary cause of PSNA. In keeping with How's (2015) findings, the fear of recurrent bullying was also felt to negatively impact on pupil transition.

In contrast, none of the three pupils interviewed in research by Dannow et al (2018) reported experiencing bullying. It is perhaps not surprising given the small sample size that bullying was not part of the narrative for these particular pupils. However, the researchers propose that participants description of social exclusion could be viewed as a more subtle form of bullying. This is consistent with findings from Baker & Bishop (2015), which indicate peer rejection as being linked with PSNA. Both authors suggest that multiple, alternative factors may contribute to a feeling a lack of belonging in school which in turn may impact upon pupils' motivation to attend. Thambirajah et al (2008) propose a dynamic model of PSNA whereby the stressor of bullying in conjunction with family problems can exceed pupils support and resilience. This notion is supported by findings from Clissold (2018) in which pupil accounts indicate an accumulation of factors influencing their resilience, with bullying being an additional factor impacting upon their ability to cope, resulting in PSNA.

REVELVANT KEY CONTRSTUCTS FROM PSYCHOLOGY V: Resilience

The concept of resilience can be difficult to define however broadly this is understood as the ability to 'bounce back' following adversity or challenging circumstances. Rather than being an innate, fixed characteristic, resilience is conceptualised as a dynamic process, changeable across time, context and situation. One definition is:

The capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten the viability, function or development of that system (Masten, 2014).

In relation to PSNA, pupil's capacity for resilience can therefore be understood as emerging from the interaction of multiple interconnected parts of their lives including their families, peers and school. Individual pupil resilience depends upon the resilience in other parts of the system (Masten, 2015) and can be promoted through: strong relationships, a sense of belonging, agency and high expectations (Roffey, 2016).

Parents also perceive bullying as being linked to PSNA. Seven of the twenty-two parents interviewed in Wallace's (2017) study said that they kept their children home due to negative interactions with peers and bullying. Whilst research indicates that pupils and parents see bullying as being a central contributory factor to PSNA, Grandison (2011) found differing perspectives from professionals. The accounts from learning mentors in her research conveyed a sense of doubt regarding bullying as a cause of PSNA because pupils' 'claims' were 'seen as unproven' (Grandison, 2011 p183). This finding reveals a positivist perception from staff interviewed which values scientific 'evidence' and by virtue fails to acknowledge pupils' individual truths and realities in regards to experiences of bullying. I would agree with the conclusions of Grandison (2011) that it is of little relevance as to whether

there is 'evidence' of the bullying reported by pupils or parents. Bullying may take place in unsupervised areas of the school, outside of school or over social media and it is therefore important that pupils' voices are listened to and their experiences outside of observable environments are believed.

Summary of school-related factors

Research exploring the perspectives of pupils, parents and professionals has drawn attention to a range of school-related factors considered to influence PSNA. These include curriculum and academic demands, factors relating to the school environment and routine, pupil-teacher and peer relationships and bullying. As is the case with both individual and family factors, those for school-related factors are often interlinked and best understood within an interactionist perspective. There does not appear to be a shared understanding of the reasons for PSNA, which will now be discussed in more detail.

2.3.5. Are shared understandings of the reasons for PSNA held?

The existing literature presents differing perspectives from individual pupils, families and school staff regarding the reasons for non-attendance. Despite many pupils and parents reporting school-related factors as being the primary contributor of PSNA (i.e. Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Dannow et al; 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Malcolm et al, 2003), various studies have found that school staff de-emphasise the significance of school-related factors, believing individual and family-related influences to be the underlying reasons for PSNA (i.e. Archer, 2003; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gren-Landell et al, 2015; Finning et al, 2019). For example, two out of three of the focus groups in Finning et al's (2019), study concluded that staff did not believe that school contributed toward the 'problem' for the majority of students.

Aucott (2014) used a case study design to triangulate the views of pupils, parents and teachers regarding the 'causes' of non-attendance. Her findings illustrate the extent to which understandings differ, with only one of the three focus groups identifying the same 'causes' between the triad of participants. Although pupils in this study were primary aged and therefore not representative of the present research demographic, the findings were considered relevant to the present research. The views relating to the causes of PSNA which were most commonly shared between pupil, parent and staff related to family holidays, general illness and medical problems. It could be argued that these factors are more objective and tangible than the causes which were less commonly shared, including pupil's mood, difficulties with peers and teachers and boredom in school. These can be considered to be subjective since they relate to unique and individual experiences of attending school. This strengthens the case for including pupils' perceptions in research that seeks to gain insights into participants' understanding and experience of PSNA. This conviction is supported by Billington

(2018) who concludes that it is important to consider contributory factors to non-attendance from the pupil's perspective to provide effective support.

Reid (2008) suggests that the causes of PSNA are constantly evolving alongside the developments of modern life. Their findings revealed an increase in issues including cyberbullying, gang membership, eating disorders and racism as contributing toward PSNA from the perspective of school staff. From a social constructionist position, pupils could be understood to experience differing and multiple realities regarding the factors they consider to contribute toward their PSNA. This suggests that although it may be of value to understand some of the risk factors for the phenomenon, it is important to understand individuals unique and context-specific experiences. With this in mind, I will now outline research which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences of PSNA.

2.4. What are pupils lived experiences of PSNA?

Many of the studies referred to so far, aim to uncover the risk factors or 'causes' of PSNA. However, the literature suggests that this is a complex phenomenon within which the experiences and factors at play are likely to be unique to each individual at any given point in time. In order to contribute to an understanding of this, several researchers have attempted to explore the lived experience of non-attendance from the perspective of the individual pupil (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Billington, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Mortimer, 2018). Using semi and unstructured interviews and active listening approaches, these studies shed some light upon the individual experiences of a range of secondary school-aged pupils.

2.4.1. Making sense of PSNA

Gregory & Purcell (2014) and Baker and Bishop (2015) adopted Interpretative Phenomenological Approaches and utilized semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of PSNA to inform the practice of EPs and other professionals. Underpinned by the interactionist perspective, their findings suggest that PSNA can rarely be understood as the result of a single contributory factor but rather as a complex interplay between multiple interlinking factors. Key themes in Gregory & Purcell (2014) included feeling blamed, being bullied and being threatened with punitive action, however, the researchers conclude that the way that pupils make sense of their experiences of PSNA is highly individualised. This research can be commended for the value and importance the authors place upon child voice. But since the purpose of this study was to assess whether child voice ***could*** be captured for research, insights gained regarding pupils' experiences of PSNA or what they felt would support their attendance were limited.

2.4.2. Listening to pupils' voices

Baker and Bishop (2015) note that although each participant made sense of the experience of non-school attendance differently, they shared similar experiences such as their voices not being listened to and the meaning of their experiences being reframed by adults when attendance difficulties first surfaced. These experiences, the authors suggest, resulted in feelings of anger, tendencies to suppress emotions and feeling lost in a response to PSNA which is slow to recognise individual need. Similarly, pupils within Gregory & Purcell's (2014) research reported that school staff did not attempt to elicit their views about the difficulties they were experiencing with their attendance, with one pupil stating; 'no-one asked my opinion, I would have liked to have gone to school but I couldn't' (Gregory & Purcell, 2014, p45).

Whilst the importance of listening to pupils' experiences of PSNA is clear, research has also highlighted the difficulty that pupils can encounter in making sense of this (Beckles, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Mortimer's (2018) findings indicate that some pupils find it difficult to identify the underlying reasons for PSNA or articulate this to others. Mortimer (2018) emphasises the importance of the development of trusting interpersonal relationships, suggesting these are required for professionals to support pupils to make sense of their experiences. One way to approach this may be through active listening approaches.

Billington (2018) conducted a narrative inquiry and utilized an active listening approach to gather the perspectives of three pupils on their experiences of missing education. Her findings highlight the importance of adults recognising pupils' experiences, actively listening and being aware of their own responses. Billington (2018) argues that to promote inclusion, we must move away from the current systems which use preconceived ideas about how best to support pupils to make decisions and instead, work to facilitate opportunities for the development of rapport between pupils and key adults; empower pupils to communicate their views effectively and to contribute within joint problem-solving processes. Although this research involved participants who had experienced at least 5 months of non-attendance over a consecutive period of a year, these lessons are considered particularly pertinent in relation to the present research which involves pupils who are on roll and attending school, as early intervention may prevent such pupils becoming 'missing in education'.

Kelly (1955) proposed that in order to understand a problem we must talk to those with whom it most concerns. The rationale for seeking children's views has a significant history which stems from the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989). This was ratified by the UK in 1991 and emphasised the rights of the child to be heard and for their views to be taken into account in matters which affect them. Momentum in this movement has continued to build which is reflected

within a range of legislation and guidance identifying the importance of listening to children's voices (The Children's Act, 1989). Involving children and young people in decision-making is felt to promote self-esteem, responsibility, and engagement (Shier, 2001). However, pupils' views about their attendance are not often sought by schools (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gase et al, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015). The next section will focus upon the research which aims to give voice to pupils experiencing PSNA.

2.5. How can we support pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school?

A wealth of literature explores the impact of 'treatment' and interventions aimed to improve school attendance. The breadth of this research is beyond the scope of this review and in keeping with the underlying philosophical position of the current study and conceptualisation of PSNA as socially constructed, only papers which included pupil, parental or staff perspectives regarding non-attendance were included. It seems logical to assume that by addressing the factors associated with PSNA, pupils' attendance in school can be improved. However, appreciative or solution-orientated approaches are derived from a belief that by only focusing on things which are 'not working' we can miss important parts of the picture (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Approaching the problems from the other side and considering the factors which help motivate pupils to attend school may reap better outcomes for all concerned. The following sections will present findings from research which aim to explore the factors perceived to be supportive in increasing school attendance, from pupil perspectives and consider the changes, pupils feel could be made to increase their attendance.

What do we already know about the factors which pupils feel help them to attend?

Considering the emphasis on child voice within attendance legislation, there is a surprising dearth of research which explores the views of secondary school-aged pupils in relation to the school-related factors which motivate them to attend. Wilkins (2008) suggests that this critical gap needs to be filled, arguing that if motivating factors can be understood, school reform may be possible. From the literature search, six studies were identified which included an exploration of the views of secondary school-aged pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the factors which motivate them to attend school:

1. Wilkins (2008) School characteristics that influence student attendance: Experiences of students in a school avoidance programme.
2. Grandison (2011) School refusal and reintegration from short-stay school to mainstream.
3. Nuttall and Woods (2013) Effective interventions for school refusal behaviour.
4. Mortimer (2018) Going back to school following a period of extended school non-attendance: What do secondary school-aged young people and their parents find supportive? An Appreciative Inquiry.

5. Beckles (2014) An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school.
6. Gase et al (2014) Youths experiences and perceptions of truancy.

These studies are considered to be most pertinent to this thesis as they aimed to place the voice of the child at the foreground. Of the six key papers, four report findings regarding pupils' perceptions of the school-related factors which helped them to reintegrate back into school following a period of school non-attendance (Grandison, 2011; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Mortimer, 2018; Wilkins, 2008). Similar in nature to the research in this thesis, Beckles (2014) explores pupils' perceptions of this topic with participants who are currently attending but whose attendance meets the criteria for PSNA. Research by Gase et al (2016) and Mortimer (2018) focuses on the changes that pupils feel could be made to increase their attendance.

In the next section research exploring what worked to support attendance will be critically considered, after which those focusing on `the changes that pupils feel could be made to improve school attendance will be critiqued. The majority of these studies sought views from parents and professionals alongside pupils (Beckles 2014; Grandison 2011; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Malcolm et al, 2003; Mortimer, 2018). Whilst professional and parent views have been reported elsewhere in this chapter, this section will only focus on pupil perceptions.

2.5.1. What factors support reintegration into school following PSNA?

Research by Wilkins (2008) and Grandison (2011) explored the factors considered to support pupil attendance with reference to reintegration. Wilkins (2008) sought to explore the school characteristics that influence pupils' attendance by interviewing pupils who had previously 'refused' to attend but who were willingly attending a 'school avoidance programme' at an alternative provision for pupils with special educational needs. Factors perceived to impact upon attendance included:

- A sense of belonging which came from being around pupils with similar needs.
- Calm classes with reduced pressure.
- Fair and non-punitive disciplinary procedures.
- Relationships with teachers who demonstrated attunement, a caring nature and provided support with learning.

This research contributes to our understanding of the school-related factors that motivate pupils to attend, however, a number of noteworthy criticisms can be highlighted with regards to this research. Wilkins had been a teacher in the research setting for six years prior to conducting the research which means she may have been known to some or all participants. This raises potential

issues relating to power-imbalances and social desirability responding bias. The author herself acknowledged that '*having taught five other students who had transferred to Brookfield park because of extended school non-attendance, I was aware of the conditions that enabled them to readjust to the school environment'* (p.16) and as such it is possible that evidence was sought to fit into pre-existing schema about what worked previously to support these pupils, resulting in researcher bias. In addition, the author may have had an invested interest in showing the setting in a positive light. Finally, all participants transitioned into the same specialist setting and as identified by the author, it is important to consider these findings within their unique social and educational context. However, despite this criticism, these findings are supported by additional research which I will now go on to discuss.

Grandison (2011) aimed to explore the factors that supported or acted as barriers to pupils described as displaying "school refusal behaviours" reintegrating from a short-stay school for pupils with mental health and medical needs into a mainstream school. Five pupils were interviewed about their experiences of PSNA and the perceived barriers and facilitators to reintegration. Factors identified as supporting successful transition included:

- A phased reintegration.
- A personalised approach to support specific anxieties about change.
- Support for pupils to understand their emotions.
- Collaborative relationships between parents and professionals from both educational settings.

Alongside pupil views, the perceptions of parents and school staff were elicited. Although the findings from this study provide an understanding of 'what worked' within reintegration from a range of perspectives, the voices of pupils became slightly muted within the analysis. This highlights the need to present pupils' voices in a way which makes a clear distinction between pupil views and the interpretation of their experience by the adults around them.

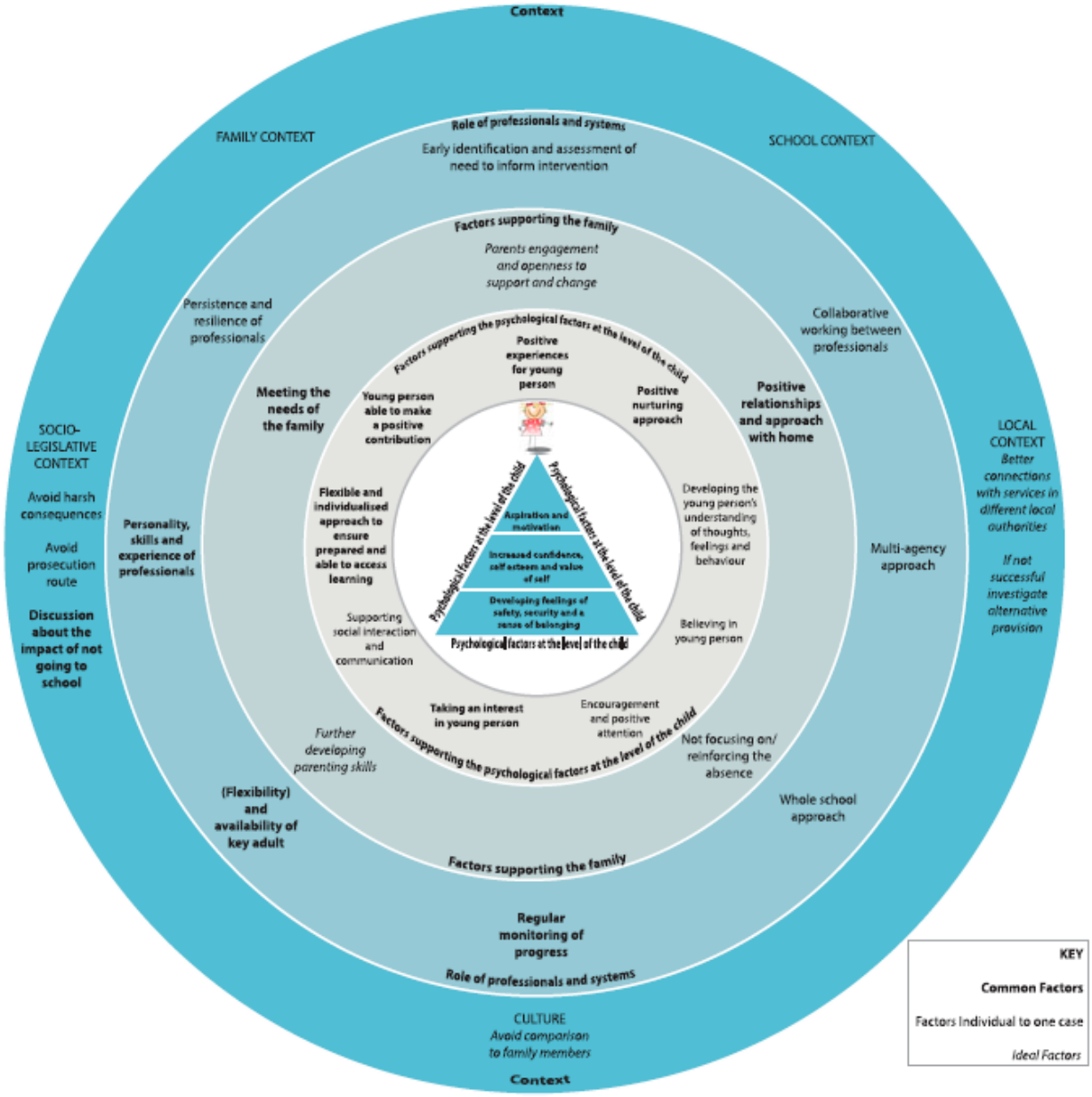
Nuttall and Woods (2013) and Mortimer (2019), aimed to understand 'what worked' to support increased attendance of secondary school pupils with PSNA. Nuttall and Woods utilized a case study design, conducting semi-structured interviews with two pupils (age 13-14) whose attendance had improved following a period of "school refusal". Factors perceived by participants as supporting their attendance included:

- Those considered to increase feelings of safety, security and belonging, such as access to small welcoming spaces at lunch.
- Those felt to enhance self-esteem and value, such as being given additional responsibilities.

- Having flexible individualised learning opportunities.
- Developing relationships with friends and key adults in school.
- Promoting a positive, nurturing school approach.

Nuttall & Woods (2013) research highlights the wider environmental and systemic factors which contribute toward successful attendance interventions. In addition, it provides scope to consider the importance of the EP role which is described by Pellegrini (2007) as being one which considers the systemic factors which contribute toward the phenomenon and supports pupils at various levels. Nuttall and Woods (2013) triangulated findings from pupils, parents and professionals to create a multi-level, ecological model of intervention for 'school refusal' behaviour, based upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systemic theory (see figure 3). This method of triangulation is considered appropriate for the development of the model which emphasises interactions between the individual, psychological support, family support, professional and systemic factors. However, it becomes difficult to distinguish which themes, subthemes and subsequent interpretations are based upon pupils' perspectives alone due to this triangulation approach. Although promoting child voice was not the primary objective of this research, it could be argued that this contributes to the literature that expresses pupils' experiences from the viewpoint of adults.

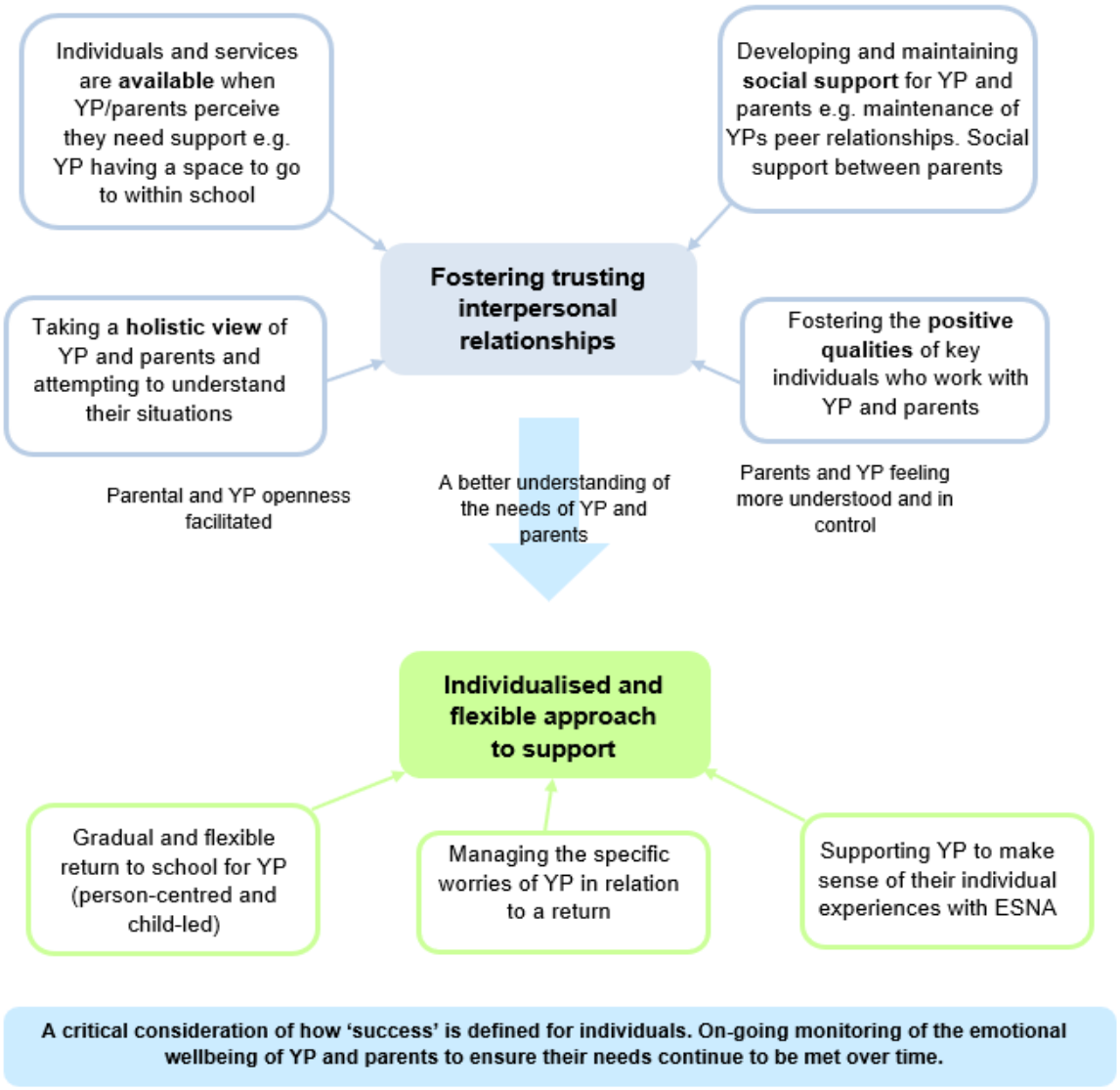
Figure 2: Nuttall and Woods (2013): Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration.



Mortimer (2018) also used semi-structured interviews with two pupils following a period of non-attendance to explore their perceptions of the factors they found helpful in supporting their return to school and what support they would like to see in the future. The sample sizes for both studies were small due to difficulties in recruiting participants. As with the present research, Mortimer (2018) employed an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) research methodology in order to focus on the positive aspects of pupils' experiences and uncover features of their support that were considered to be 'working well'. Factors which motivated pupils to return to school included:

- Having trusting interpersonal relationships with others.
- Experiencing a gradual and flexible return to school.
- Having control over the return to school and support to manage their worries.

Figure 3: Mortimer (2018): Appreciative model



Nuttall and Woods Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration (2013) has been criticised by Billington (2018) who argues that although the model offers a range of approaches to support the reintegration of pupils with attendance difficulties back into school, the next steps required to effectively implement these approaches into practice are not included. In keeping with the appreciative methodology of her doctoral research, Mortimer (2018) developed an appreciative model to illustrate the factors which may support pupils' return to school following non-attendance (see figure 3). Mortimer hoped that this would build upon the Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration developed by Nuttall and Woods (2013) by including not just the factors perceived to contribute toward attendance but also an approach for implementing these in practice.

Research by Grandison (2011), Mortimer (2018) and Nuttall and Woods (2013) concentrate specifically on pupils for whom anxiety is seen as the primary cause of their PSNA. This focus may

result in pupils who are viewed as “truants” being excluded during the recruitment and thus may inadvertently contribute to a discourse which segregates pupils experiencing attendance difficulties into separate sub-categories. As outlined in the Introduction Chapter, in practice this can lead to pupils with similar underlying needs being treated inconsistently (Tobias, 2019). For example, pupils considered to be “emotionally based non-attenders” may be offered the support and interventions referenced in the above models, whilst those whose PSNA is conceptualised as “truancy” may be met with punitive or legal responses.

So far in this section, I have discussed findings which relate to the factors considered to support positive transitions and reintegration back into school. In line with the aims of the current research, this literature contributes toward our understanding of what secondary school systems are already doing that works well to help support attendance in pupils experiencing PSNA. Next, the factors perceived to support the attendance of pupils who are currently on roll within a secondary school but who experience difficulties with school attendance will be discussed.

2.5.2. What factors motivate pupils to attend school?

This section will consider the findings from a doctoral thesis by Beckles, (2014) which explores pupils’ perceptions of the factors which motivate them to attend school. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, Beckles (2014) explored the perceptions of 12 pupils in years 8 and 9, during the early stages of their non-attendance regarding the support they had received at this time. Factors associated with school attendance included:

- Those relating to the academic environment such as opportunities for paired learning, quieter classrooms, the use of exit cards and enjoyable lessons.
- Those involved in positive relationship formation, including; the role of friends in increasing school enjoyment and providing emotional support, the need for teachers with caring nature who value pupils’ opinions and support from external school professionals such as young carer and counselling services.
- In addition to previous research in this area, Beckles (2014) highlights the importance of participation and pupils being included in decisions about attendance proceedings.

By focusing on participants’ experiences of support, Beckles (2014) research contributes to an understanding of pupils’ perceptions regarding the practical interventions implemented by schools to support attendance. In general, support strategies were not viewed as effective by participants many of whom for example had been assigned key staff that, they did not find to be useful. Consistent with findings from Nuttall & Woods (2013) participants felt that having positive relationships with key adults and being able to access them more frequently would support their

attendance. Similarly, bullying interventions were considered ineffective resulting in continued PSNA. Participants perceived there to be a lack of vigilance from staff regarding bullying and reported that pupils were not involved in the decision-making or monitoring processes around these interventions. Beckles (2014) concluded that it is not enough to simply implement the factors outlined in Nuttall & Wood's (2013) Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration. But that regular monitoring of the effectiveness of support for PNSA is required, such as the approach outlined in Mortimer's (2018) Appreciative Model.

As in the present thesis, Beckles (2014) adopted participatory methods including the Drawing the Ideal School Technique (William & Hanke, 2007) to help elicit participants constructs about school, however, this research focused on participants experiences at the early stages of non-attendance, including pupils from just one setting and excluding participants deemed to be engaging in 'anti-social activities' or 'truanting', which are key differences between the research methodologies. Beckles (2014) adopted a problem-focused approach within the interview schedule design. Questions were focused on things which were not working well, for example, asking pupils to 'think of one of the days you had the most difficulty at school'. This approach may have reaped a wealth of information but aspects of the support systems which were working well may have been missed, leaving a gap in the literature which the appreciative methodology of this research aims to fill.

2.5.3 What changes do pupils feel could be made to help them attend?

So far, the factors considered to support school attendance have been discussed and reviewed. The proceeding section will critique literature which presents pupils' perceptions regarding changes which could be made within the school environment to increase their motivation to attend. A second focus of the research conducted by Mortimer (2018) involved ascertaining the support that pupils would like to see implemented in the future to support PSNA. Much like the present study, this research question aimed to capture the Dream phase of AI. Visual timelines and scaling activities were used within participant interviews to support the elicitation of their views. Factors pupils felt would further support attendance in the future included:

- Supportive relationships, including having more access to supportive key adults and enhanced peer relationships.
- Support to make sense of their experiences of PSNA.
- Practical support such as a gradual and flexible return and provision to manage worries about returning to school.

These findings contribute to an understanding of future changes that could be made within school systems to support PSNA. However, they relate to pupils' experiences of 'what worked' after a

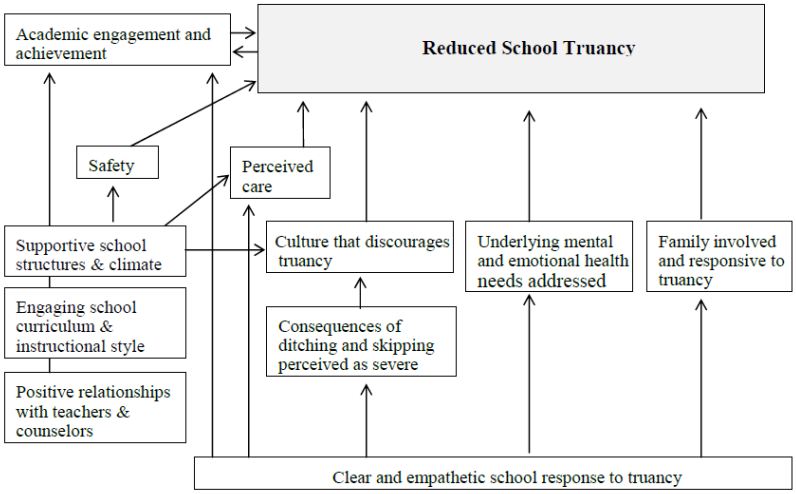
return to school following a period of non-attendance. Little is understood about the perceptions of pupils who are still regularly attending school but who have attendance difficulties regarding the changes they feel could be made to support their attendance.

Gase et al (2016) explored youths' perceptions of 'truancy' and recommendations for reducing this. Interviews were conducted with 39 pupils aged between 13 and 19. The majority of participants in this research were on roll with a school at the time of recruitment. They felt that their attendance could be improved by:

- Modifying the school environment, by for example:
    - Ensuring an interesting and culturally relevant curriculum,
    - Having access to small group work,
    - Increasing support from class teachers.
- Improving the school response to truancy so that staff are aware of and attempt to understand pupils' difficulties and respond with appropriate consequences and boundaries.
- Focusing on student and staff relationships by improving the amount and quality of contact from key staff.
- Increased attendance monitoring from parents and staff.

Gase et al (2016) aimed to identify practical implications for system reform and the model presented in figure 4 was created to support this. Importantly, the researchers highlight that truancy-reduction models should target school climate more broadly rather than focusing directly upon modifications related to attendance. However, the focus of this research on pupils who had 'skipped' or 'ditched' class implies that the researchers distinguished between "emotionally based non-attenders" and "truants" and thus represents a different participant group than that sought within the present research. Participants in Gase et al's (2016) study were also required to have had an experience of a 'law enforcement-based truancy reduction approach' and so it could be assumed that their views on what would need to change would likely relate to the specific interventions aligned with this approach. However, many of these findings triangulate with those from Nuttall & Woods (2013), Mortimer (2018) and Beckles (2014) suggesting that the school-related factors which motivate pupils to attend may bare similarities across different contexts and provisions.

Figure 4: Youths' perspectives of a Well-Functioning System to Reduce School Truancy



2.6. Key Findings

In this chapter, the literature exploring PSNA from the perspective of pupils, parents and professionals has been reviewed. Key findings of what is already known regarding pupils' perceptions of the school-related factors that help them to attend and their views about changes that could be made to the school environment to increase attendance are summarised in table 3:

Category	Factors that help pupils attend	Suggested changes to increase attendanc
Academic Environment	• Calm classes with reduced pressure. • Fair and non-punitive disciplinary procedures. • Opportunities for paired learning. • Quieter classrooms. • Enjoyable lessons. • Access to work experience.	• Access to a more interesting curriculum. • Access to small group work.
Relationships	• Teachers who demonstrate attunement and a caring nature. • Welcoming and positive school staff. • Role of friends in increasing school enjoyment and providing emotional support. • Collaborative home-school relationships.	• Increased access to supportive key adults • Time to focus on social and emotional ne with key adult. • Enhanced positive peer relationships. • Increased family support and engagemer school.
Support to meet needs	• Support to manage anxieties (i.e. exit cards). • Flexible, individualised support with learning. • Support for pupils to understand their emotions. • External support from young carer/counselling services.	• Support to make sense of experiences of PSNA. • Gradual and flexible return to school following NA. • Support to manage worries about return to school. • Increased support from teachers.
School response to PSNA	• Pupil participation and being involved in decision-making about attendance.	• Staff who are aware of and attempt to understand pupils' difficulties. • Appropriate consequences and boundari
Safety and Belonging	• Being around others with similar needs. • Access to small welcoming spaces at lunch. • Being given additional responsibilities. • Consistently available adults in designated room. • Positive and nurturing school ethos.	

Table 3: Key findings

2.7. Chapter summary and my position as a researcher

Pupils' voices are underrepresented within the wider literature in the field of PSNA. This review concentrates only on research that explores the perspectives of pupils, families, and professionals. This focus has highlighted a positive shift toward the inclusion of children and young people within research in this area. Previous research exploring PSNA from the perspectives of pupils, families and professionals has focused primarily on understanding the underlying 'causes' of PSNA so that effective interventions can be designed to bring about increases in attendance. Factors considered to contribute toward PNSA are often categorised into those relating to the individual, the family and the school. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) provides a useful framework through which to understand the factors which contribute to PSNA as these are often multiple and interlinked. PSNA is best understood as the product of dynamic interactions taking place between the pupil and their environment at the ecological levels of home and school.

With this understanding in mind, several researchers have sought to explore the lived experience of PSNA to inform professional service delivery. These studies find that individual experiences require individual responses and highlight the importance of listening to pupils' views regarding their experience to plan effective interventions. A small number of previous authors have set out to explore the school-related factors that pupils feel help them to attend school. Several studies retrospectively consider 'what worked' following successful reintegration back into school after a period of non-attendance and have subsequently developed models which promote a systemic understanding of PSNA and highlight approaches and next steps for practitioners to consider within intervention design. This literature, however, is focused upon supporting a return to school rather than promoting the attendance of pupils who experience difficulties but have not experienced chronic or extended non-attendance. Beckles (2014) explores the experiences of secondary school-aged pupils at the early stages of non-attendance. Even though Beckles research took a problem-orientated perspective, her findings provide a foundation of understanding which the present study aims to build upon.

The focus within some of the literature pertaining to the role of anxiety within PSNA exemplifies a within-child perspective which, in my view risks an approach in which the wider role of the school environment might be minimised or ignored. This, in turn, may lead to school staff feeling disempowered and lacking the agency required to create change. My hope within this review is to shift perspectives toward the systemic and environmental influences which may contribute to and interact with anxiety. Much of the existing literature in the area of PSNA is small-scale and inductive, giving rise to a set of meanings, understanding or themes about PSNA and further research is required in order to generate "pattern theories" (Lincoln & Guba, 1989) whereby interconnected

parts are linked to a whole (Creswell, 2013) to develop our understanding of the factors which support attendance for pupils experiencing PSNA.

The literature pertaining to pupils' experiences of PSNA suggests that they do not feel as though their voices are heard. Therefore, importance is placed upon child-voice within the present thesis and participatory methods will be used to explore participants unique world views. Research by Finnings (2019) highlights the need for practitioners to be encouraged to recognise the impact of school factors upon attendance. Research that adopts a problem-solving perspective whereby issues are identified and suggestions are made regarding how to 'fix' them, can be considered counterproductive to change within organisations or systems as it can lead to negative discourses and subsequent defence and guilt (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987). Positive psychology perspectives and solution-focused approaches are considered effective in highlighting factors which are working well in creating systemic change (De Shazer, 1985) and Appreciative Inquiry is felt to be an appropriate methodology to highlight strengths and successes within systems such as schools.

The current study, therefore, seeks to extend our understanding of PSNA by adopting an appreciative approach to explore pupils' perceptions regarding what is already working within school systems in relation to attendance. In addition, the research seeks to listen to pupils' views about changes they feel could be made to the school environment to help increase attendance.

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter sets out the philosophical paradigm adopted and the methodological and theoretical approaches taken. It describes the research design and considers the issues surrounding how to conduct good quality qualitative research. Furthermore, it addresses some of the ethical considerations which arose throughout the research process and outlines the research methods implemented for data collection and analysis. A variety of terms are associated with the concept of methodology (Oliver, 2014). Within the context of this chapter, the term will be used to cover the theoretical, philosophical and practical aspects of the research.

3.2. Research Aims

The aims outlined at the end of chapter two, seek to appreciate existing strengths within secondary school systems related to attendance, by exploring the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school. The research also aims to consider any changes pupils feel could be made within the school environment to further enhance attendance. It is anticipated that this research will provide recommendations for future research, information to secondary school settings and Educational Psychologists (EPs) regarding how to support pupils who experience PSNA.

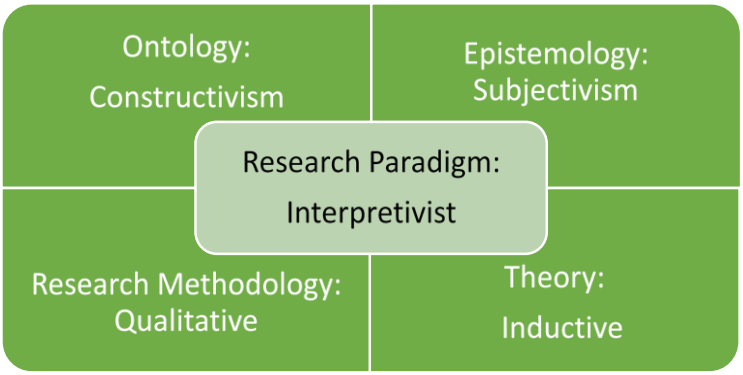
The research questions identified are as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute towards their attendance?
2. What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to help increase school attendance?
3. What can we learn from the experiences of these pupils to help guide school and EP policy and practice?

3.3. Philosophical Approach

In order for research findings to be understood by the reader, it is important to make explicit the researcher's world view and the approach they are adopting to find out what they hope to discover. The research paradigm selected underpins the whole research process including the methodological approach and the lens through which the findings are conceptualised. With this in mind, the following section will outline the research paradigm adopted within the present research and the component parts which underpin this, as displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Methodological Approach



3.3.1. Research Paradigm

Research paradigms can be understood as being overarching conceptual frameworks through which the world can be viewed. Research paradigms are underpinned by ontological, epistemological and methodological positions (Guba, 1990) and inform an understanding of the relationship between theory and knowledge.

Various research paradigms are discussed within the wider literature; however, inconsistencies exist between how these are referred to. For example, Guba (1990) proposes a distinction between positivism and three paradigms which he suggests have emerged as a challenge to this way of thinking; post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. Usher (1996) refers to positivism/empiricism, hermeneutic/interpretivism and critical theory. Whilst Bryman (2016) refers to positivism, critical realism and interpretivism. For simplicity, this chapter will focus on the Interpretivists paradigm which has been adopted within the present research, and the opposing paradigm of positivism, to add context and clarity to how these approaches to research differ.

Positivist paradigms support the view that there is a single objective reality which exists outside of the individual and that knowledge can be gained about this through research (Bryman, 2016). Interpretivist paradigms support the view that there are multiple, fluid realities and that knowledge is socially constructed (Carson et al, 2001). What knowledge is, and methods of exploring this are therefore subjective. I have chosen to adopt an interpretivist research paradigm for this study and I have made certain assumptions within its design regarding the nature of reality (ontology), how reality can be known (epistemology) and the nature of the relationship between theory and knowledge. Each of these components will now be discussed in more detail before the chosen methodology is described.

3.3.2. Ontology

Within research, ontology refers to the philosophical beliefs a researcher has about reality. The question at the heart of the ontological debate is “does reality exist independently of human

consciousness and experience, or is the world something constructed from our thoughts?" (Levers, 2013). Particular paradigms are associated with certain ontological and epistemological positions. The ontological position associated with positivist paradigms is realism, the belief that there is one objective, tangible reality which researchers are able to discover. Whereas, interpretivist paradigms are often associated with constructivism, the belief that there are multiple constructed realities which differ across context and time.

Within social research this position is commonly known as social constructionism, within which reality is understood as being subjective, personal, unique and actively shaped by human interaction and perceptions (Cohen et al, 2007). A distinction has been drawn between social construc***tionism*** where discourse or language is of central importance and social construc***tivism*** which emphasises cognitive structures (Gergen, 1999), however, Gergen (1999) proposes that these concepts can both be incorporated within a theory whereby social interactions and language contribute toward constructions of the world.

I consider young people experiencing school non-attendance to have individual models of the world and therefore differing and multiple realities regarding the school-related factors they feel contribute toward their attendance. This ontological underpinning led to the development of the research aim to explore participants ***perceptions*** regarding these factors.

3.3.3. Epistemology

Epistemology has been defined as being the study of knowledge, or "a way of understanding how I know what I know" (Crotty, 1998, p.3). Epistemological assumptions relate to how knowledge can be acquired, created and communicated (Scotland, 2012). Positivist researchers are likely to adopt an objectivist epistemological position to uncover a single, objective truth about the area of study and use standardised measures or other quantitative approaches. Interpretivist researchers believe that the realities of participants are multiple and socially constructed and are likely to adopt the epistemological position of subjectivism. Subjectivism is based upon real-world phenomena and underpinned by the belief that that the world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Grix, 2004). Individuals are understood to construct subjective meaning about the same phenomenon in different ways (Creswell, 2013) and truths are considered to be co-constructed between individuals though social interaction.

In the context of the present research, the 'reality' of the factors contributing to school attendance are considered to be co-constructed between individuals and their social worlds. This subjectivist epistemological position posits that phenomena can only be understood by exploring participants views of this and the meaning they attribute from their interpretations of reality (Cohen et al, 2007).

The present research, therefore, aims to explore individual experiences and perceptions through qualitative methodological approaches.

3.3.4. Theoretical approach

Within social research, theory can be understood as providing both a rationale for the research being conducted and a framework within which phenomena can be understood and findings interpreted (Bryman, 2016). Deductive approaches are usually associated with positivist paradigms and quantitative research. Deductive researchers use information about what is already known about a topic (including theory) to form a hypothesis, which is then tested through data gathering (Bryman, 2016). In contrast, inductive approaches are often associated with interpretivist paradigms and qualitative research and involve theoretical ideas being derived from the research data itself, rather than being formed prior to data collection.

Instead of providing a universal theory, inductive approaches give rise to a set of meanings, understanding or themes about social behaviour in a variety of contexts and situations (Cohen et al, 2007). These multifaceted themes have been referred to as "pattern theories" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and are felt to represent interconnected parts which are linked to a whole (Creswell, 2013). The present research aims to explore new phenomena in the form of participants perceptions of the school-related factors which contribute toward attendance and in line with the epistemological and ontological positions, adopted an inductive theoretical approach. The bottom-up analysis of data involved in inductive research aims to place participants views at the centre of the research process (Hayes, 2000) which is also in line with my personal values regarding the importance of eliciting authentic child-voice.

It is important to highlight that inductive and deductive approaches are not mutually exclusive and inductive approaches often contain elements of deduction (Bryman, 2016). Although theory was not used to create a hypothesis within the current research, it is acknowledged that my previous experience working with pupils experiencing PSNA and my knowledge of the topic following the preliminary literature review process likely contributed to the development of a set of assumptions about school non-attendance, which in turn may have influenced my choice of interview questions. Steps were taken to minimise these existing views which may have created bias during data collection and analysis stages of this research namely the use of semi-structured interviews which allowed for participants' individual stories to be shared.

3.3.5. Positive Psychology

Deficit-based approaches to research have been criticised for limiting our understanding of successful human functioning (Sheldon & King, 2001). Positive Psychology is the science of wellbeing

which aims to discover and promote the factors which enable individuals to thrive (Seligman, 2002). Theoretically, it is underpinned by Humanistic Psychology and the Person-Centred Approach developed by Carl Rogers (1986). Positive Psychology aims to resolve some of the issues associated with deficit-based approaches through the use of positive language and recognition of strengths (Wilding & Giffey, 2014) and emphasises the importance of the right social environment in order for self-actualisation to occur.

Applied to research, Positive Psychology is felt to provide a richer picture by considering the potential for positive growth within individuals, systems and wider society (Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). Research of this nature seeks to explore "what works, what is right and what is improving" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). Positive Psychology and Person-Centred Approaches gave rise to the problem-solving and strengths-based approaches, central to EP practice (Kelly, et al, 2008) including, motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller,1995), solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer, 1985) and Coaching (Palmer & Whybrow, 2014). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) propose that research focusing upon an appreciation of 'what is working' and 'what could be better' has the potential to influence EP practice by transforming perceptions about a phenomenon and instigating organisational change. In the context of the current research, a Positive Psychology approach was selected to both identify the existing strengths within school systems and provide an opportunity for participants to recognise their own strengths in relation to their school attendance.

3.4. Qualitative research

This research is exploratory in nature and seeks to establish a better understanding of an area where limited research currently exists. Due to my epistemological, ontological and theoretical positions, as outlined above, a qualitative methodology was deemed to be the most appropriate approach to meet the research aims. Qualitative research methodologies are concerned with identifying and describing the themes which underpin human experience, or the experience of a particular phenomenon (Della-Porta & Keating, 2008). This methodological approach allows for the acknowledgement of the individual realities of pupils experiencing PSNA and the different ways they make sense of the school-related factors contributing to their attendance. Qualitative approaches also have the potential to inform policy and practice (Green & Thorogood, 2004), supporting the final aim of the present research.

3.4.1 What makes good qualitative research?

Research is evaluated for its value, worth and merit by peers, reviewers, experts and readers (Sypress, 2017) using criteria which serve as standards from which judgements can be made (Morse et al, 2002). Typically, these relate to concepts of reliability, validity, rigour and trustworthiness

which are frequently used to consider what makes 'good' research (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013). However, questions have been raised about whether increasing reliability and validity within qualitative research equates to increased rigour or trustworthiness in the same way as within quantitative research (Sypress, 2017). Golafshani, (2003) argued the importance of researching and testing these concepts to improve the quality of research in any paradigm but particularly from a qualitative point of view, where they may not be relevant and may need to be redefined in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth.

Qualitative research has been criticised for not complying with the standards of quantitative research (Yardley, 2000). However, Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that since criteria such as reliability and validity are rooted in positivist research paradigms, they may not be appropriate to evaluate interpretivist research based upon positivist assumptions or criteria and vice versa. This leads me to ask the question; as a qualitative researcher who believes that individuals have differing and equally valid perspectives regarding 'reality', which perspective should be used to evaluate the validly of research? (Yardley, as cited in Smith, 2015). Lincoln and Guba's work through the 1980s and 1990s has been instrumental in the development of criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research (Morse et al, 2002). One such tool is the Total Quality Framework (TQF) (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) which comprises the concepts of Credibility, Analysability, Transparency and Usefulness.

Despite the challenges raised above, I believe that it remains important to show that qualitative research is sound and rigorous and that findings are valuable. The TQF was selected as a Framework to both ensure the quality of the present research and as a method to evaluate this. The four criteria of the TQF are presented in figure 6 and will be returned to within the Conclusion Chapter where the quality of this research will be critically considered:

Figure 6: Total Quality Framework (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015)

Credibility Credibility relates to the trustworthiness of the research outcomes. It comprises how representative the study participants are of the target population and the quality of the data gathered.
Analysability Analysability concerns what is done with the data, and encompasses how the data are processed (e.g., transcribed), how sense is made of them, and how findings and conclusions are verified.
Transparency Transparency relates to the completeness and full disclosure of all aspects of the research.
Usefulness Capability refers to the ability to do something of value with the research findings and recommendations.

3.5. Appreciative Inquiry

Several methodological approaches were considered within the initial planning stages of this research. In order to increase the transparency of my decision-making processes for the reader (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) a description of each of these approaches can be found in Appendix B. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was considered to be the best fit for the research aims and objectives. This section will provide an overview of AI, the rationale for its selection and a critique of the approach.

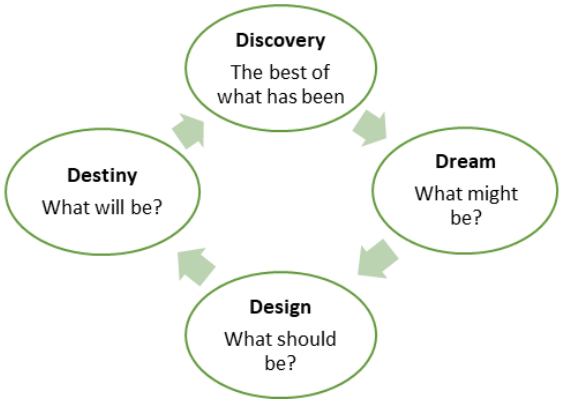
Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was developed during the 1980s by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta as a research method for promoting organisational change and development. AI adopts a positive, strengths-based approach by inquiring about the things that are already working well to inform future change, rather than identifying and fixing problems. AI has origins in Action Research which is participatory in nature and involves researchers and participants working together to understand problematic situations and create positive change (Bergold, 2007).

Appreciative Inquiry offers an alternative to the usual problem-solving approach taken by researchers in this field. Cooperrider and Srivasta (1987) criticised problem-solving approaches, arguing that by identifying problems, organisations are treated as though they have issues which require solving and that this can be counterproductive to change. They argued that systems and organisations are best viewed as socially constructed realities and that these can become constrained by the beliefs and imagination of organisation members (Bushe, 2011). They felt that by focusing on problems, the subsequent discourse can lead to further difficulties due to getting stuck in the language of defence and guilt. Finally, the problem-solving approach within traditional action research does not often result in the generation of useful theory or new ideas for future change. The shift in perspective created through AI and the transformative insight that inquiry itself can shape the way systems and organisations are viewed, led to the development of the AI model (Bushe, 2013).

3.5.1. The 4-D model

AI is often described as a four-stage cycle involving *discovery*, *dream*, *design* and *destiny*, as seen below in figure 7. A fifth stage *define* is sometimes added to the beginning of the cycle to ensure clarity about the focus of inquiry from the initial stages (Hammond, 2013).

Figure 7: The 4-D Appreciative Inquiry model (adapted from Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005)



Discovery- 'the best of what is or has been'

The first stage is designed to focus participants on the positive elements which already occur within a system or organisation. During this initial stage, participants are invited to reflect on and discuss *the best of what is or has been.* The aim within this stage is to uncover existing strengths and begin to shift mindsets and vocabulary away from deficit-model thinking. Within the current research this involved discussions about participants most positive school experiences and times they felt most proud of themselves at school.

Dream- 'what might be'

The second stage involves creating a positive image for the future. Participants are invited to imagine the organisation or system at its best. This phase often results in a symbolic representation such as images or graphics. The Drawing the Ideal School task was used within the current research to focus participants on what their dream or ideal school would be like.

Design- 'what should be'

This stage, involves participants being prompted to think about how their dream could be created. Participants are invited to develop concrete proposals of their ideal organisation or system, based on previously successful examples. Within the current research, a scaling exercise was used to help participants think about what could be changed within their current school to make this more similar to the vision they described within the ideal school drawing task.

Destiny- 'what will be'

The Destiny stage aims to facilitate the opportunity for members of the organisation or system to take personal responsibility for change. Participants are invited to use the outcomes of the Design phase to create new targets, fill gaps and bring all of the previous phases together into a logical conclusion. Whilst planning this research a pragmatic decision was made not to complete this phase due to time constraints.

3.5.2 Rationale for using AI

My own interest in AI was sparked during a university lecture where the methodology was first introduced to me. Despite having a background in research, AI was not something I was familiar with and this exciting approach which celebrates achievement, success and what is already working rather than identifying and exploring problems, captivated my interest. AI's grounding in participatory approaches, Positive Psychology, and solution-focused approaches resonated with me as these are major influences in my practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). I felt passionate about capturing pupils' voices within my research in a way which had the potential to empower them, highlight their strengths, and facilitate their involvement in change initiatives.

Listening to and valuing the opinions of pupils is central to my practice as a TEP and the collaborative and participatory nature of AI appealed to me as an approach whereby power imbalances could be addressed and pupils could be actively involved within the research process itself to identify good practice and consider potential change.

As a TEP, I have found solution-focused approaches to be particularly effective for creating systemic change within the school environment. I felt that it was important for this research to have real-world impact and to contribute toward school and EP policy and practice. As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, much of the existing research in the field of PSNA focuses on the 'problem' of non-attendance by exploring the perceived 'causes' of this and pupils' lived experiences of the phenomenon. The literature review also highlights the lack of a shared understanding around PSNA with school staff tending to attribute the underlying difficulties within the child and family system. This is likely to impact upon locus of control and result in school staff and systems experiencing a lack of agency to create positive change. I felt that taking a solution-focused approach and identifying the strengths within school systems would support the research aims and that the appreciative nature of AI provided the best fit for this approach.

3.5.3. Critique of AI

A common critique of solution-focused approaches more widely has been raised within the application of AI. It is felt that the focus on positive experiences and stories within the discovery phase of the 4-D cycle can lead to participants feeling as though their problems or concerns are invalidated and thus potentially meaningful conversations which contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon are not shared (Egan & Lancaster, 2005). However, a critical review of the use of AI (Oliver, 2005) highlights the importance placed on both the positive and negative stories within the AI process, arguing that it is not possible to inquire into visions of a positive future without considering the negative past or present (Bushe, 2011). The potential for this challenge was

minimised within the present research by the introduction of the non-ideal school element of the Drawing an Ideal School task. Participants were asked to draw, write and talk about a school that they would not want to go to, enabling opportunity for negative thoughts, experiences or problems to be shared with the researcher before moving on to focusing on their ideal school.

3.6. Research Design

The present research is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm which allows for it to be shaped by participants views and beliefs rather than be constrained by myself as a researcher or existing theory. It is influenced by positive psychology, participatory approaches, Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955) and uses an AI methodological approach. Consideration of the research purpose and questions were key to the selection of the appropriate research design. This research aimed to capture pupils' voices, explore their perceptions regarding the school-related factors they perceive as contributing toward attendance and elicit their views about any changes that could be made to their current school environment to further enhance attendance. Therefore, data collection techniques which enabled participants to share their reality about these topics were selected.

3.6.1. Population

PSNA is more prevalent in secondary school-aged pupils than primary (DfE, 2020b), therefore a decision was taken to recruit secondary-aged pupils between the ages of 11 and 18 from within one LA in the South West of England. It was hoped that through the application of AI to discover existing strengths, alongside exploring participants hopes and dreams for the future within a specific LA system, the research would contribute to recommendations for local school and EP policy and practice.

As discussed in the Literature Review Chapter, much of the existing research focuses on the views of a combination of parents and professionals alongside pupils. Through a social constructionist lens, it is felt that the perceptions of those most concerned regarding the school-related factors which help pupils to attend, would contribute to our understanding of pupils co-constructed 'realities' regarding this. However, several authors who triangulated such perceptions have acknowledged that pupils' voices can become 'lost' or 'muted' amongst the voices of others (Aucott, 2014; Grandison 2011). Therefore, in order to emphasize child voice, it was decided that, exclusively, pupils' perceptions would be sought within this research.

The criteria outlined by Tobias (2019) to define PSNA was selected for use in this research as it was considered broad and inclusive of a wide spectrum of non-attendance characteristics rather than pertaining to previously defined sub-types as discussed in chapter two. Inclusion criteria, therefore,

required the school attendance of the pupil to fit with one or more of the following characteristics of PSNA:

- Persistent lateness
- A pattern of low or patchy attendance
- Morning behaviours that prevent leaving home, e.g. refusal to get dressed
- Difficulty remaining at school for a full day
- Refusal to attend classes
- Attendance under significant duress, e.g. crying/pleading at the school gates
- Authorised absence for serial somatic complaints
- Complete absence for a significant block of time

3.6.2. Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who were deemed to be experiencing PSNA and therefore potentially able to provide useful insights in relation to the research aims. Purposeful sampling strategies have been criticized for lacking generalizability; however, I did not intend to gather a representative sample of participants nor generalise the findings to all pupils experiencing PSNA. Participants' individual experiences were sought in order to contribute to an increased understanding of this topic.

3.6.3. Approach to recruitment

In order to contact potential participants, a range of recruitment options were considered. For pragmatic reasons secondary schools were selected as appropriate 'gatekeepers' as they had access to the desired research population and pre-existing links with the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) in which the research was conducted. In September 2019, recruitment emails with copies of the school recruitment letter (see appendix C) were sent to the headteachers of all secondary schools in the LA (n=15). Schools were asked to contact myself (the researcher) if they wished to participate. The research was also discussed within each school's Annual Planning Meeting in September 2019 which was held between the schools Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) and their link EP. If SENCo's expressed interest, they were asked to discuss this with the headteacher before expressing interest via email.

Once interest had been expressed by schools, meetings were arranged between a member of school staff and myself to discuss the research in more detail, answer any questions and discuss next steps. Initial meetings were held with six schools. As previously outlined, purposeful sampling was utilised whereby school staff identified pupils who they felt met the inclusion criteria. Recruitment packs were assembled (see appendices D-G) in blank envelopes. School staff added participants names and

addresses before posting to ensure anonymity. In total 18 recruitment packs were sent and 7 expression of interest forms were received from parents. Interested parents were contacted via their preferred methods (email/text/phone). An overview of the research was provided, questions were answered and if continued interest in taking part was expressed, an initial meeting was scheduled between myself, the potential participant and their parent at a time and venue of their choice (home or school).

3.6.4. Rationale for sample size

Limited information exists regarding the ideal number of participants required for the process of AI within research (Bushe, 2011). Patton (2002) suggests that there are no clear rules about sample sizes within qualitative research and that these can be influenced by what will be useful and realistic within a specific time-frame. Previous studies which focused on eliciting the views of pupils experiencing PSNA have utilized relatively small sample sizes, (i.e. Nuttall & Woods, 2013 n=2). Alternative structured qualitative methodological approaches such as IPA suggest below 10 participants (Smith et al, 2009), and this helped to guide the sample size for this research. Initially, it was deemed that between five and ten participants would be an appropriate sample size for the present research to develop a 'rich picture' without resulting in high volumes of data which would pose a challenging for engagement on a deeper level within the available time frame (Onwueguzi & Leech, 2005).

In total, seven participants were recruited to take part in the research. All participants attended mainstream secondary schools. A summary of participants demographic information can be found in Table 3. To protect participants anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant prior to analysis.

Participant Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Year Group	School Pseudonym
Emma	F	12y	8	Ivoryway
Lilly	F	14y	10	Olivetree
Megan	F	14y	10	Olivetree
Frankie	F	14y	9	Sagedown
Ava	F	11y	7	Sagedown
William	M	12y	7	Sagedown
Simon	M	15y	10	Sagedown

Table 3: Demographic summary of participants

A decision was made not to include individual pupil profiles to maintain anonymity and to avoid contributing to the discourse which separates PSNA into sub-categories based upon the presumed underlying aetiology of the phenomenon. Each participant experienced at least one of the eight behaviours noted as comprising PSNA by Tobias (2019) as outlined above. All participants had experienced a pattern of low or patchy attendance at some point over the past year, Frankie, Emma

and Megan found it difficult to attend certain lessons. William and Simon experienced morning behaviours which prevented them from leaving home and persistent lateness. Emma and Frankie experienced difficulties remaining at school for the full day. And, Emma, Ava, Lilly and William experienced authorised absences for serial somatic complaints. None of the sample had experienced complete absence for a significant block of time in the year prior to recruitment.

3.7.5. School profiles

All participating schools were mixed, urban, mainstream secondary schools. Ivoryway had a 'requires improvement' rating in their last Ofsted in 2018 and has the highest absence statistics of the three schools in the year 2018/2019 which was above the national average, however, had received recognition for the priority placed upon attendance since the previous Ofsted report. Sagedown and Olivertree had 'good' Ofsted ratings and overall attendance ratings just below the national average and persistent absence ratings just above the national average. Sagedown had the highest number of pupils eligible for free school meals (37.2%) and had been commended for the 'rigorous monitoring' system they had in place to monitor attendance which was below the national average for the year 2018/2019. The key points related to attendance for each school are provided below in table 4 (in this year the national average for overall absence was 5.5% whilst persistent absence was 12.7%):

School	*Absence rating year 2018/2019*	*OFSTED rating and year*	*Key points RE attendance*
Ivoryway	Overall absence 7.7% Persistent absence 22.3%	Requires Improvement (2018)	• Improving attendance has been a school priority. Significant success reported, rates of absence a little higher than the national average. • Success in reducing the number of persistently absent pupils, although figure is still high. • Process for disadvantaged pupils previously poor, partly due to be attendance being 'well below' that of other pupils. Disadvantaged pupils beginning to make better process, although still achieving less than other pupils.
Olivetree	Overall absence 5.2% Persistent absence 14%	Good (2017)	• Small number of pupils, often from disadvantaged backgrounds persistently absent and not making good progress due to needs not being successfully met. • A minority of pupils not making progress because they are not engaged or stimulated by their curriculum. Most are from disadvantaged backgrounds and are persistently absent. • Absence ratee 'too high', higher than national average number of pupils are persistently absent. Teachers do not always make sure that absent pupils catch up on missed work on their return which impacts upon progress.
Sagedown	Overall absence 5% Persistent absence 13.4%	Good (2017)	• School leaders monitor the attendance of disadvantaged pupils closely and ensure that barriers to participation are removed. • Attendance is good. The poor attendance of pupils who have SEN has improved and is now close to the national average as a result or more rigorous monitoring systems and better planning.

Table 4: Key points RE attendance for recruited schools

3.7. Data Collection

Each participant attended three research sessions over approximately two to four weeks. The initial meeting was intended to build rapport and lasted approximately 20-30 minutes. The two interview sessions lasted approximately 60 minutes. All sessions took place at either the participants home or school settings, depending upon their personal preference. Before each interview, time was spent engaging participants in informal conversation whilst the session activities were set up. In doing so, it was hoped that a positive environment would be created where participants felt comfortable sharing their individual experiences. An overview of the interview sessions is provided below in table 5:

Session	Research Question	Phase of 4-D cycle	Methods
1	What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance?	Discovery *(The best of what has been)* Dream *(What might be?)*	Semi-structured appreciative interview Ideal School drawing task
2	What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to increase school attendance?	Design *(What should be?)*	Scaling Semi-structured solution-focused interview

Table 5: overview of interview sessions

3.7.1. Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured appreciative interviews

The appreciative interview is considered to lie "at the heart of Appreciative Inquiry" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p.14) and aims to identify and explore participants' peak experiences. Conducting AI interviews provides opportunities for meaningful participation and supports the creation of meaning between individuals (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Due to this co-construction of meaning and the philosophical underpinnings of the present research, appreciative interviews were considered to be an appropriate method of data collection. The appreciative interview is particularly key to the Discovery stage of the 4-D cycle and was selected to collect rich, unique data about the individual world view of each participant and their perceptions regarding the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance.

A semi-structured approach was selected to guide the direction of participants narratives towards the specific topic of the school-related factors which support their attendance and the changes they felt could be changed to increase this. An interview guide (see appendix H) was devised to provide a flexible structure through which to explore this topic. An introductory script and open-ended questions were asked to all participants. Prompts and follow up questions were used to enable participants the freedom to talk in an unstructured way about the aspects of their experience which

were most important to them. This provided the flexibility to follow participants own views and perspectives and clarify points (Bryman, 2016).

The Drawing the Ideal School technique

It has been argued that we can't just ask a child for their view and expect them to tell us (Hobbs et al, 2000) and that even if they do, children may not always be consciously aware of their beliefs (Kelly, 1955). Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) suggests that in order to understand an individual's model of the world we must find a way to explore the underlying basis for its construction (Roller, 1998). Participatory methods are considered valuable tools for gaining an understanding of pupils' perceptions within qualitative research (Darbyshire et al, 2005). This involves using creative and visual approaches in order to facilitate the collection of participant's views and direct involvement of them within the research process.

The Drawing an Ideal School technique (Williams & Hanke, 2007) is a PCP tool which helps pupils understand and express their constructs about school and was originally developed as a practical tool to capture the views of children with Autistic Spectrum Condition about optimum school provision and future aspirations regarding this, to inform intervention.This technique was selected for use in the present research to aid pupil participation within the research process by helping to elicit participants' views and visions regarding their ideal school in relation to the Dream phase of the 4-D AI cycle. The technique has been shown to support pupils to express their views regarding the type of school they would like, using a mixture of drawing, writing and talking (Williams & Hanke, 2007). Participants were first asked to think about a school they would not like to go to (their non-ideal school), before thinking about their ideal school. Participants were encouraged to draw these concepts as they were being discussed. This technique elicited participants constructs about a variety of aspects of the school environment including their perception of the optimum elements of education provision and the school environment. These constructs were then used within a solution-focused interview where participants were asked to think about what changes could be made within their current school for it to be more like their ideal school. This provided data related to research question 2.

Craft-based activities such as drawing are considered to be effective methods for capturing pupils' voices as they minimise the influence of adults (Maxwell, 2006) and can reduce anxiety as they avoid direct face-to-face interaction (Beresford et al, 2004). The use of these techniques within research has been criticised due to the difficulties which can arise when attempting to interpret participants' drawings (Dockett et al, 2009). To minimise the level of adult interpretation within the present research, participants were prompted using open questions to explain or elaborate upon their

drawings so that their individual interpretations of these were captured within the interview. Participant drawings were not the sole focus of the research findings but were presented alongside interview quotations to add visual representations. An example Ideal School drawing can be found in Appendix I)

Scaling

In addition to the ideal school drawing task, scaling questions based upon solution-focused approaches were incorporated into the interview schedule. Scaling activities are considered to be anchoring tools which enable individuals to measure and evaluate progress towards solutions (Berg & Dolan, 2001). Participants were provided with a scale from 0-10, with 0 described as their non-ideal school and 10 as their ideal school. Participants were asked to rate their current school on the scale. This provided an opportunity to highlight things which were working well (Young & Holdorf, 2003) by asking participants why they had not given their current school a lower score. Before participants were supported to consider changes, which could be made within their school environment, by asking what would need to change in their current school for their score to move up the scale to a number closer to their ideal school. The scale was provided on an A4 piece of paper (see Appendix J) and participants were asked to circle the number on the scale to represent their answers to the scaling questions.

3.7.2 Data Collection Procedure

Session 1:

It was important to me that participants felt as comfortable as possible throughout the research process and were asked whether they would prefer the initial meeting to take place at home or school. Both of these settings were felt appropriate when considering the credibility of the research as they are common venues for EPs to meet with pupils experiencing PSNA difficulties. In order to initiate the development of rapport, a 'One Page Profile' (see appendix K) containing a photograph of and some information about myself was sent to participants prior to the initial session. The purpose of session one was to develop rapport, discuss the research in more detail and answer any questions. Participants were read the information sheet and if they wished to participate, informed consent was gained using the pupil consent form (see appendix G).

Within this initial meeting, participants were asked whether they would like their interviews to be conducted in the school or home environments. Six took place at school and Emma decided that she would prefer to be interviewed at home. Each participant took part in two interviews, each individual interview lasting between 20 and 66 minutes. Interviews took place between November 2019 and March 2020.

Session 2

The second session began with an overview of what to expect from the session. Participants were asked whether they had any questions before beginning. The digital recorder was started and the session began with a school timeline task which aimed to provide a gradual introduction to the topic of PSNA and enable participants to begin to reflect on previous school experiences. This also provided me with a key to correctly identify which school experience was being referred to throughout the interview process. Next, a semi-structured appreciative interview was conducted. An interview schedule containing broad, open questions were used to initiate discussions which focused upon participants most positive school experiences, the factors they felt help them attend school and the positive aspects of their current school. With the research aim being to understand participants perceptions and experiences, a flexible approach was taken within the interview process, and participants were encouraged to lead conversations in the direction they desired through verbal and non-verbal prompting.

The second phase of this session involved introducing the Drawing an Ideal School task (William & Hanke, 2007). Large A2 sheets of paper and a range of multi-coloured pens were provided and participants were encouraged to draw a picture of a school they would not like to attend before being asked to draw their ideal school. A series of prompts were used to explore various aspects of their non-ideal and ideal schools, including classrooms, pupils, uniform, teachers etc.

Session 3

The third session began with a recap of the previous session, if participants had not finished completing the ideal school drawing task, this was continued before semi-structured solution-focused interviews were conducted. A visual scaling task was utilized as a stimulus for discussion. With 0 on this scale being described as participants non-ideal school and 10 being the ideal school they described in session two. Participants were asked where on the scale they would rate their current school and what would need to change for their rating of school to move higher up the scale. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.8. Data Analysis

The analysability of qualitative data is an important consideration for research quality. This concerns how the data are processed, how sense is made of them and how findings and conclusions are verified (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Data were analysed using the six-phase thematic analysis (TA) guidelines produced by Braun and Clarke (2006). TA is a method for identifying, organising, analysing and reporting themes across data to find repeated patterns of meaning. A range of methods for TA exist within the literature (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Bryman, 2016; Tuckett, 2005), however, it was felt

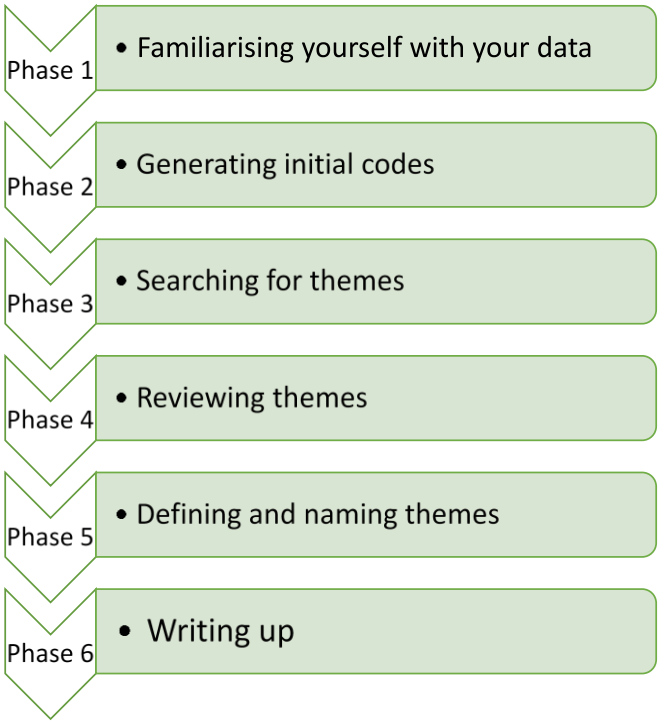
that Braun and Clarkes (2006) guidelines provided a clear structure which would contribute to rigorous data analysis (Spencer et al, 2003). To increase the credibility of the data, a 15-point checklist for 'good TA' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was followed to check for quality. TA has been described as providing results in an accessible format which can be useful when informing organisational policy and practice (Braun & Clarke, 2006) supporting this research aims of this thesis.

Qualitative research has been criticised for providing insufficient information regarding how data has been analysed (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and describing passive accounts of the process of thematic identification. It was therefore deemed important to make the data analysis process and my active role in this clear and explicit within this research. In line with the theoretical underpinnings of the research, an inductive or bottom-up approach to data analysis was adopted, whereby codes and themes were derived from the data itself rather than ideas, topics or theories being brought to the data for interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

TA is a flexible method which can be applied across a range of epistemological and theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the case of the present research, TA was used within the interpretivist paradigm to explore individual participants perceptions and experiences and to identify any themes between participants stories which could contribute to an increased understanding of the topic of PSNA. TA is also considered suitable for application alongside a range of research methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and was felt to be an appropriate selection for the AI methodology of this thesis because it provided the opportunity to identify themes across the different stages of the 4-D cycle which related to different research questions.

Within TA, a theme is understood as pertaining to aspects of the data which are deemed important in relation to the research questions. In line with Braun & Clarke's (2006) guidelines, I retained flexibility when considering whether data was determined as being a theme. Due to the social constructionist position of this research, a latent approach was adopted within the analysis whereby the data was looked at beyond a semantic level and underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations and ideologies were explored (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A visual representation of the 6-phase process is presented in figure 8 and a detailed description of data analysis in relation to each phase is provided in Appendix L to ensure transparency of this process:

Figure 8: The six-phase process of Thematic Analysis



Following data analysis, each participant was sent a letter, thanking them for their participation and outlining the key points from their interview (see Appendix M).

3.9. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted in March 2019 by the Norah Fry School of Policy Studies Ethics Committee at the University of Bristol. The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018) was adhered to and ethical mindfulness was adopted throughout the research process so that arising ethical concerns could be identified and addressed. The following section will discuss some of the ethical considerations which arose within this research, including informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, power relationships and risk of harm.

3.9.1. Informed Consent

A key ethical consideration when conducting research with children is whether the research can be explained in a way that they understand in enough detail for consent to be valid (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Information sheets were produced for both parents and participants and sent in advance of my initial visit to allow time for these to be read and understood. The research was explained verbally during initial visits with participants and their parents and opportunities for clarifying questions were provided. Consent forms were also read aloud and participants were encouraged to ask questions, before completion. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without having to provide a reason. Consent was not

assumed throughout the rest of the research process and participants were asked whether they would like to continue at the beginning of each subsequent session.

3.9.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity issues can be prevalent within qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). All of the information gathered as part of the study was treated as strictly confidential. Interview transcripts were held on a secure file within the University database. Participants were informed that if they disclosed information indicating a risk of harm to themselves or others that this would be shared with a member of school staff and followed up through the appropriate safeguarding channels (Munro, 2001). Consent forms containing participants names were stored electronically on a secure file and at the University of Bristol and all paper copies were destroyed in confidential waste. Pseudonyms were used in the place of participants names within interview transcripts. Once interviews had been transcribed all audio files were destroyed. Although pseudonyms were used and all identifiable characteristics were deleted from interview transcripts, due to the small number of participants in this research it was considered possible that participants accounts could be recognisable from the data by those who know them well. The impact of this upon confidentiality and anonymity was acknowledged and shared with participants through participant information sheets and consent forms.

3.9.3. Power relationships

It is important to consider the impact of power imbalances within research. Within positivist research paradigms the researcher is often considered to hold a position of higher power than the participant (Karnieli-Miller, et al, 2009). However, interpretivist frameworks seek to promote equal participation within the research where knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participant (Karnieli-Miller et al, 2009). With a focus on attempting to elicit participants stories and experiences, the latter was the chosen approach for this research. However, it has been argued that power imbalances continue to exist between interpretive researchers and their participants, as the researcher has more to gain from the process, sets the research questions, decides when to use prompts and when to end conversations (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). During the data-collection stage of qualitative research, participants have been suggested as holding power and control over their private, individual experiences and therefore the researcher must establish a level of rapport and trust for participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories.

Being mindful of this, several steps were taken to attempt to create an atmosphere of ‘power equality’ throughout the data collection process. In advance of the initial visit, participants were sent my ‘One Page Profile’ which contained a photograph and some information about my interests in an

attempt to restore some of the imbalance. I also worked to provide a warm, friendly environment and wore informal clothing within each meeting to help participants feel relaxed. The use of drawing and sharing information on large sheets of paper within this research's methodological approach was also considered to contribute to the redistribution of power as participants stories were shared and meaning co-constructed through questioning and prompting. It has, however, been suggested that adopting practices to make participants feel equal and comfortable can increase their vulnerability as it can result in the sharing of information which they did not intend to and may later regret (Karneili-Miller et al, 2009). Therefore, at the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they would like to omit any of the details or information they shared during the interview.

3.9.4. Safety and Well-being

The BPS ethical principle to not cause harm to participants was of central importance to this research (BPS, 2018). Reflexive practice was utilized to 'consider all research from the standpoint of the research participants, for the purpose of eliminating potential risks to psychological well-being, physical health, personal values or dignity', (BPS 2009, p19). Social research is considered to have a low risk of physical harm (Hill, 2005) nevertheless, it can hold the possibility for psychological distress such as embarrassment or anxiety (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). The use of an appreciative approach within the present research which predominantly focused on existing strengths was considered to reduce the risk of psychological distress, additionally, participants were informed that interviews could be stopped at any time and a protocol was developed within the ethical proforma for ensuring a member of school staff would be available should a participant become upset during the research sessions. To help participants feel safe throughout the research process they were given the opportunity to choose where they met with the researcher and at what time (Green & Hill, 2010). Researcher safety was also considered in accordance with the guideline that as Psychologists we have a responsibility to be mindful of potential risks to ourselves (BPS, 2018). Therefore, the EPS policy regarding home visiting was followed.

3.10. Chapter Summary

The current research aimed to appreciate existing strengths within secondary school systems related to attendance, by exploring the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school. The research also aimed to consider any changes pupils felt could be made within the school environment to further enhance attendance. It was anticipated that this research would provide recommendations for secondary school settings and EPs regarding how to support pupils who experience PSNA. The first three stages of the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D cycle were used as a framework to conduct semi-structured interviews with seven pupils. The ideal school drawing task and scaling were used to elicit pupils' views across two interview sessions. This chapter outlined the

research's philosophical underpinnings and the way in which this informed the research design, data collection and analysis before ethical considerations were explored.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will present and discuss the findings of the data. Seven interviews were conducted with participants between October 2019 and March 2020 and data was analysed through Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This chapter combines a presentation of the research findings with a discussion of these in relation to previous literature and addresses three research questions:

1.) What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding school-related factors that contribute to their attendance?

2.) What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to increase their school attendance?

3.) What can we learn from the experiences of these pupils to help guide school and EP policy and practice?

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) provided a framework to help address these questions. For research question 1 the Discovery and Dream phases of the 4-D AI cycle were used to consider ***the best of what has been*** regarding participants' school experiences and ***what might be*** in relation to what an ideal school might look like. The Design phase was used to focus participants on ***what should be*** regarding what could be changed within their schools to increase their school attendance, addressing research question 2. As the findings from research question 2 build upon those from research question 1, a combined approach has been adopted and findings are presented and discussed within one chapter. Firstly, an overview of the five superordinate themes identified through the data analysis are outlined. Next, the findings relating to research question 1 are presented and discussed. Then, the findings relating to research question 2 are presented and discussed. Finally, the findings from both research questions 1 and 2 are discussed in relation to what we can learn from these to help guide school and EP policy and practice, thus addressing research question 3.

4.2. Themes

Five superordinate themes were identified within the data, each with several subthemes. Two superordinate themes relate to research question 1 and three relate to research question 2. Within this chapter, findings for the research questions are presented in turn. Each theme will be described to give context before individual subthemes are explored. Themes are not presented in order of relevance or importance. Given the complexity of individual participant experiences, several superordinate and subthemes are inter-related. These relationships will be outlined within the

presentation of research findings and explored in further depth within the discussion of findings sections. The themes relating to each research question are presented below and are summarised in table form in Appendix L.

The themes identified in relation to research question 1 included:

- Theme 1: The importance of positive relationships
- Theme 2: Positive learning experiences

The themes identified in relation to research question 2 included:

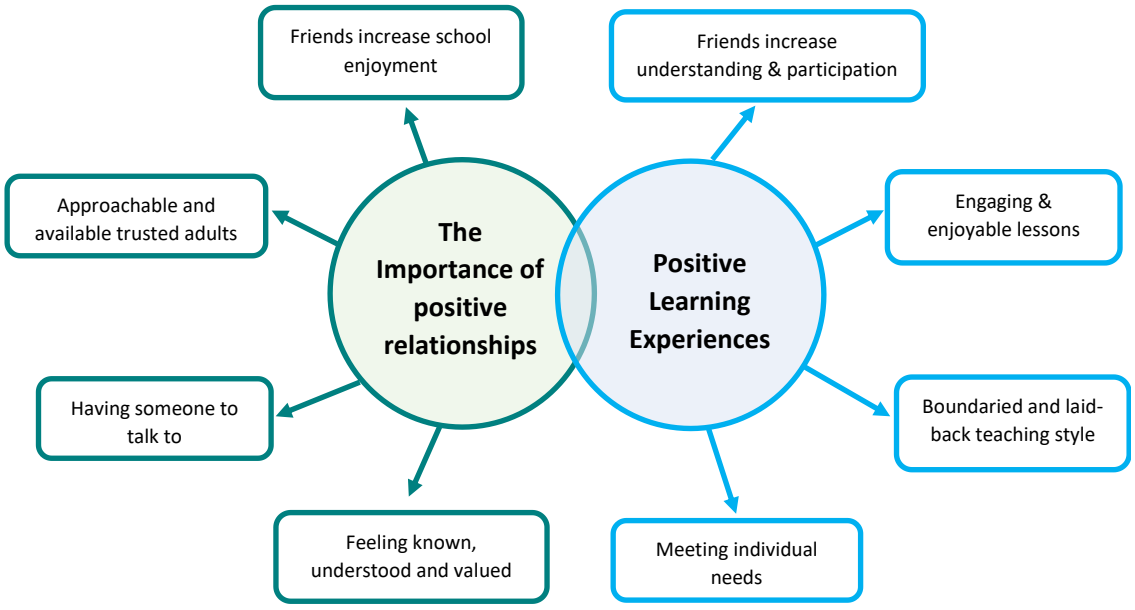
- Theme 3: Enhanced positive relationships
- Theme 4: Enhanced positive learning experiences
- Theme 5: Feeling comfortable in school

4.3. Research Question 1: Presentation of Findings

RQ1: What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance?

Two superordinate themes and eight subthemes were identified in the data which were considered to pertain to research question 1. These are displayed in figure 9 in the form of a thematic map.

Figure 9: Thematic map of RQ1



4.3.1. Superordinate Theme 1: The importance of positive relationships

The first Superordinate theme describes the impact of relationships on pupils' perceptions of school. The experience of having positive relationships with peers and adults were central to participants narratives about the school-related factors which contribute toward attendance. This superordinate theme is comprised of four subthemes. The first subtheme ***friends increase school enjoyment*** describes the positive impact of friendships on participants' experiences of lessons and school more broadly. The second subtheme ***approachable and available trusted adults*** outlines positive qualities of key adults. The third subtheme ***having someone to talk to*** highlights the importance of receiving emotional support from others in school and the fourth and final subtheme emphasises the importance of ***feeling known, understood and valued*** for the development of positive relationships.

4.3.1.1. Sub Theme 1-Friends increase school enjoyment

The importance of having friends in school and the impact of this upon school enjoyment and subsequent attendance was discussed by all participants. For some, just knowing their friends would be in school and that they could share activities of interest with them helped them feel positive about attending:

> ***Megan:*** *'I'm just happy because I know that I've got people there with me, that I get along with and I just feel comfortable.'*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants' favourite things about attending their current schools included spending time with friends during free time. Participants felt that break and lunchtime provided opportunities to have fun and connect with friends who they do not share lessons with:

Megan: *'I mostly like the lunch and breaks and the lessons I have with my friends.'*

Picture 1: Talking and laughing with friends

Frankie found the academic demands of school challenging and felt misunderstood by many adults in school. Spending time with her friends was perceived to be the only aspect of the school day which she enjoyed:

> ***Frankie:*** *'The only actual time I feel happy is break and lunch when I see my friends, so, any other time I'm just stressed out.'*

In line with subtheme ***friends increase confidence and participation,*** having friends in lessons and particularly sitting next to friends was felt to increase school enjoyment. This contributed to participants feeling more comfortable and subsequently, lessons were described as being interesting and fun:

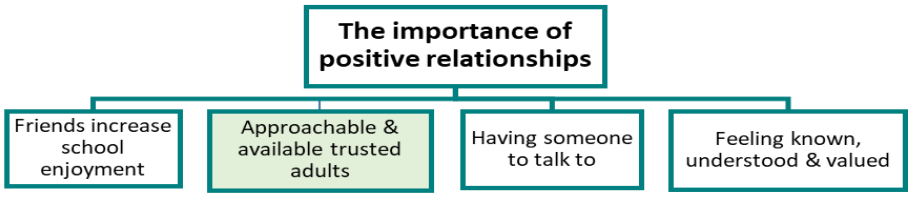
> ***Lilly:*** *'my friends, because I was in so many classes with them that It just became more fun to go to that class…when she's not in it's like the class becomes almost boring to me because she's not there and I can't have fun. I feel more kind of err sad, and that makes me a bit more stressed out.'*

Friends were also mentioned in the context of factors which help participants both come into school and stay in school throughout the day. When participants knew their friends would not be in school this impacted directly upon their motivation to attend, highlighting the importance of this school-related factor on attendance:

> ***Megan:*** *'My friends go in there because I know they're going to be at school. Sometimes if they're not at school, I really don't want to go.'*

> ***Lilly:*** *'My friends again because I like hanging out with them but I think it's like classes and friends that help me, stay in school'*

4.3.1.2 Sub Theme 2- Approachable and available key adults



Having approachable and available key adults in school were perceived by participants as contributing to their attendance. Approachable adults were considered as being those who were kind, welcoming, funny, understanding and supportive. Approachability impacted upon whether participants felt able to ask adults for support with learning or wellbeing, as Frankie highlighted: *'it's got to be someone I get along with... otherwise I won't talk to them'.*

Participants perceptions regarding their most positive school experiences were centred around primary school, with school staff being described as warm and nurturing. Emma described how the consistency of one key adult and use of physical contact by staff in the form of hugs helped her to feel safe and provided an environment where her peers and teachers felt '*like a family'* or a *'community'*. Emma felt comfortable and relaxed in the primary environment and felt able to approach school staff with her worries:

> ***Emma:*** *'It felt like if you had a problem, you could go speak to them, whereas in secondary school sometimes it's not always like that. And I just felt like it made me very relaxed and I didn't, I, I just felt really comfortable around everyone in the class.'*

As well as key adults in pastoral positions, participants suggested it was important that they felt comfortable approaching teaching staff. Pupils favourite lessons were described in relation to warm, friendly teachers with whom they had developed positive relationships. Participants felt more able to ask friendly or '*easy-going'* teachers for help with learning:

> ***Lilly:*** *'if they're easy to talk to it's easier to go through the lesson, for shy people like me it's easier to talk to them and ask them for help and stuff, like really easy going and nice'*

As well as being approachable, it was considered important to participants that key adults were available to meet their needs. Simon and William found the transition into school each day challenging and found having a key adult meet them each morning supported their attendance. Simon found having this adult walk with him into the classroom enabled him to overcome his anxiety in relation to this aspect of transition:

> ***Simon:*** *'I have really bad anxiety about going into a class once it started. Because you walk in and everyone's looking at you, so he (Mr Stevens) just takes me and it just helps me get into class instead of staying off.'*

Emma felt that her experience of PSNA had resulted in gaps in her curriculum knowledge due to time spent out of the classroom. This was considered to impact upon her ability to understand some homework activities. Emma found it helpful when teachers were available to communicate with her virtually out of school hours through the school's online homework application:

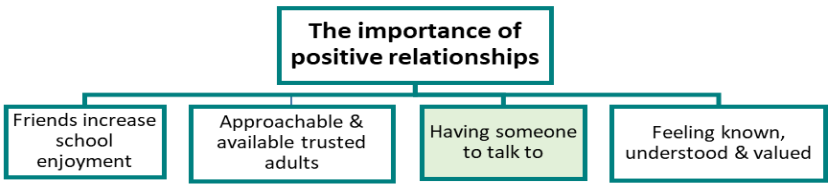
> ***Emma:*** *'if you have that ability to be able to talk to them outside of school about your worries and, and even if it is just about homework or just about other things in school'*

The school-related factor which Emma found most supportive regarding her attendance was having access to the school's support Hub. This Hub provided a physical location where Emma was able to access key adults for emotional and practical support throughout the school day. The small number

of adults who consistently worked in this Hub were described as being warm and caring which enabled Emma to feel comfortable approaching them for support:

> ***Emma:*** *'they're so lovely and caring and kind'*

4.3.1.3. Sub Theme 3- Having someone to talk to



Having someone to talk to in school contributed to feelings of security for participants. Key sources of support were identified within participants friendships, their parents and within their relationships with key adults in school. For Emma, being able to talk to her friends during free time supported her emotional wellbeing:

> ***Emma:*** *'obviously friends do help quite a bit, and being able to go see them and having that ability to talk to them at lunch and everything… I feel like if you have someone that's very supportive … it's quite nice and helps cheer you up.'*

All participants mentioned their friends in relation to people who support them to come into school. Frankie shared that her friends encourage her over online messaging:

> ***Frankie:*** *'I might message my friend going I aint coming in today and they, not force me but like try and make me come in.'*

However, Simon explained that although his friends are understanding and supportive, sometimes their encouragement alone is not enough to help him overcome his anxious feelings about coming to school:

> ***Simon:*** *'They're quite encouraging, the friends that I have, they understand what's going on, they want to help me. So, they sort of encouraged me to get in and sometimes it works, quite a lot of the time doesn't. It's just a little thing where if I'm having a bad day it might, might help me to come in.'*

Friends were particularly important to participants who did not feel able to talk to key adults in school about their concerns or worries. Simon shared that he found it difficult to talk to anyone other than his friends about the challenges he had been experiencing:

> **Simon:** *'I'm very self-conscious. I don't like going out, I can't, I find out talk to people. So, I can only just talk to my friend group normally. But I wouldn't be able to talk with anyone else'.*

Over time, without having established relationships with trusted adults in school, Simon found his anxious feelings built up resulting in what he described as a '*breakdown'*, at which point he confided in a parent. Meetings between home and school provided an opportunity for information to be shared and a more understanding approach adopted by the school. Simon feels this directly impacted his school attendance, highlighting the importance of collaborative home-school relationships:

> ***Simon:*** *'I didn't really talk about anything before. But I had a breakdown, talked to my mum, she got in touch in school and Mr Stevens he got it all sorted out. He's more understanding and the schools more understanding. So that helped a lot. If I didn't have that meeting, I think I'd still be not coming in at all.'*

Having trusted adults in school with whom participants felt able to confide in, had a positive impact upon their wellbeing. Emma found talking to the adults in the Hub helped her to relinquish worries which she would have otherwise taken into the classroom with her:

> ***Emma:*** *'I know that I can easily go in and just speak to one of the teachers in there, whereas if I just went straight to class, I know that I'd have that weight on my shoulders of everything that's worrying me.'*

Being able to contact parents for emotional support was highlighted as important to Emma, Megan and Frankie. Participants shared that they felt more comfortable in school when they had access to their mobile phones so that they could contact their parents if they were feeling worried.

> ***Megan:*** *'Just in case something happens and I will have to use my phone or just go to the toilet, quickly call my mum, just knowing that I've got my phone on me, makes it a lot more better'*

4.3.1.4. Sub Theme 4- Feeling Known, Understood and Valued

Peers and adults taking the time to get to know pupils, demonstrating that they care about their wellbeing and understand their individual needs were highlighted as important prerequisites to

positive relationship formation. The time taken to develop secure, trusting relationships was an important factor within this subtheme. As previously highlighted, participants experience in nursery and primary school were discussed in relation to times when they felt happiest in school. Knowing their teacher and classmates well and having formed positive relationships with them, appeared to contribute to a sense of community and belonging:

> ***Int:*** *'Okay so can you tell me a bit about that, why were you happiest at that point?'*
> ***Ava:*** *'Because all my friends were there and umm, I knew them since nursery, so I knew them quite well.'*

The experience of having one teacher and having personal connections with staff in school was highlighted as contributing to feeling known and secure within these environments. Frankie and Emma both had family members working in these settings:

> ***Emma:*** *'I liked *Butterflies preschool because my mum worked there. So, I felt comfortable there and how you only had like one teacher that you had to like focus on.. So, you could get along with just one teacher and not worry about oh there's a completely new supply teacher or, that I've never had before.'*

The nature of secondary school as a setting where pupils have multiple subject teachers resulted in participants experiencing relationships of varying quality with different staff. Participants valued staff taking the time to get to know them well enough to understand their individual needs and felt more motivated to attend lessons where they felt known by staff on a personal level. When asked to rate his current school out of 10, Simon scored it 'around five-ish', sharing that he gave it this score due to supportive and understanding teachers:

> ***Simon****: 'most of the teacher are supportive… and I think that most of the staff here are actually more understanding and want to know what's going on with you.'*

Emma who had an exit card which enabled her to leave lessons to access the support Hub, described the difficulties she faced when teachers did not enable her to use this, resulting in feeling *'trapped'* in their lessons. Teachers who demonstrated that they understood Emma's individual needs by enabling the use of her exit card were perceived as being '*compassionate*':

> ***Emma:*** *'the teachers in those lessons are quite nice and supportive because they know that when because when you're in the Hub and you use your exit card. They know that obviously there is something going on so they're quite understanding about that.'*

Emma spoke positively about the caring nature of the pupils who attended the support centre and the staff who worked there. High adult to pupil ratios and small groups in these settings provided

opportunities for additional time to be spent developing trusting relationships. Emma indicated that staff's prior experience of supporting pupils with their wellbeing strengthened her confidence in feeling understood by these adults:

> ***Emma:*** *'I think that, how everyone in there kind of knows how you feel... because they work with people with like anxiety, depression like anorexia and stuff like that and there just really caring.'*

Taking the time to understand pupils' needs and the reasons for their PSNA, contributed to participants feeling cared for by peers and adults in school. As discussed in subtheme ***'available and trusted key adults'*** Simon had a key adult involved in supporting his transition into school each day. The action taken by this adult to meet Simons needs contributed to feeling valued which supported his school attendance:

> ***Simon:*** *'SLT members like Mr Stevens he dedicates ten minutes of his day every morning when I come in, to chat with me, see how I'm doing, see if I can go to the class, if I can he'll take me there.'*

Simon also described an experience where a friend who understood that he was experiencing difficulties transitioning into school, came to his house to collect him, knowing that this action would likely result in a negative consequence for himself on account of being late:

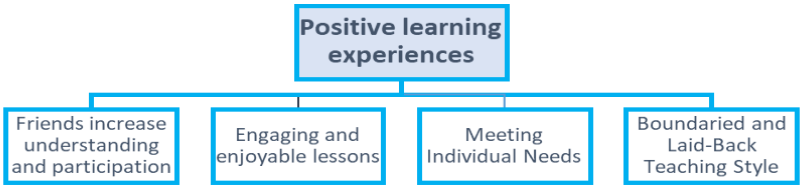
> ***Simon:*** *'they got detention for me because I was having trouble getting school, and they decided that they'd come to my house and get me in'*

4.3.1.5. Theme summary

Within this theme when considering ***the best of what has been*** regarding current and previous school experiences, participants felt that opportunities to spend time with friends, sitting next to friends in lessons, having warm and approachable adults in school who were available, experiencing effective home-school communication and feeling known and understood by those around them, contributed to positive school experiences and increased their attendance. Positive relationships with parents, school staff and friends were all important to participants in the context of the school-related factors which contribute toward attendance which was summarised beautifully by Emma who shared:

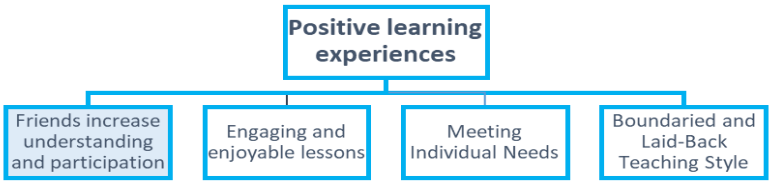
> *'it's like I'm not just going in for myself I'm going in for my mum, I'm going in for the teachers that help to look after me and I'm going in for my friends'*

4.3.2. Superordinate Theme 2: Positive Learning Experiences



The second Superordinate theme describes the impact of participants learning experiences upon their perception of school and represents four subthemes. The first subtheme ***friends increase understanding and participation*** relates to the impact of sitting with friends on participant's confidence, willingness to participate in learning tasks and subsequent understanding of lesson content. The second subtheme focuses on the impact of ***engaging and enjoyable lessons*** on participants motivation to attend school. The third subtheme ***boundaried and laid-back teaching style*** describes the qualities of teachers and the teaching style preferred by participants. The fourth and final subtheme ***meeting individual needs*** outlines the importance of pupil's individual needs being understood and met within the learning environment.

4.3.2.1. Sub Theme 1-Friends increase understanding and participation



As described in subtheme ***'friends increase school enjoyment'***, having friends in lessons was highlighted as impacting upon lesson enjoyment and subsequent school attendance. Participants felt more comfortable in lessons where they sat next to, or near, friends and felt that this impacted upon their confidence to participate in learning activities:

> ***Megan:*** '*I feel more confident, I can put my hand up more I can answer more and I'm just not shy'.*

Emma did not always feel able to ask teachers for help, but sitting next to friends increased her confidence to speak to staff and provided opportunities to ask questions of her peers:

> ***Emma:*** *'when I sit next to someone, that I feel comfortable to ask questions or like a friend or something.'*

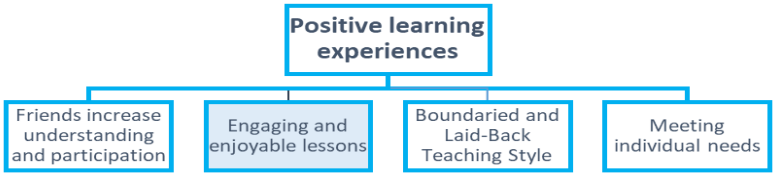
Megan felt that the increased confidence that sitting with friends brought her in lessons meant that she produced *'better work'*. This was echoed by Lilly who found sitting with friends increased her understanding of the lesson content:

Lilly: *'if I'm with my friends, it's easier to kind of understand what's going on'*

However, Lilly and William acknowledged that sitting next to friends can negatively impact upon concentration and attention:

Lilly: *'in Science I'm sat next my friends who sometimes I can get distracted and then, I don't know what I'm doing. So, I guess it would help to move away from people.'*

4.3.2.2. Sub Theme 2-Engaging and enjoyable lessons



Lessons which participants found interesting and enjoyable supported an increase in motivation to attend school. Lessons were considered engaging when they built upon participants strengths and interests, utilized creative methods and enabled group working. Lilly who has aspirations to work as a Criminal Psychologist described how despite not sitting with her friends, she enjoyed English due to her interest in the subject topic:

Lilly: *'In English, I'm not exactly sat with any of my friends…but I like what we're learning about, were learning about crime at the moment… So, that's quite interesting'*

Emma found lessons to be more engaging and enjoyable when they were delivered using creative methods which she felt provided opportunities for less academic pupils to utilize their strengths:

Emma: *'obviously academic things are very important but I feel like when we do fun or practical like things in like Science or English, when we do like debates and stuff, it's nice to have that little bit of a change, that can get more students involved, without putting loads of pressure on them.'*

Participants favoured lessons where they were able to work with the person next to them, or in small groups. They felt more comfortable asking their friends for help than approaching some teachers and felt that group work supported their understanding of the lesson content:

Lilly: *'if you're allowed to choose your groups, because in some lessons like Sociology, when I'm allowed to like walk around the class with my friends and stuff like that... I don't know, it's more comfortable.'*

Participants reported feeling motivated to attend school to get good grades and pass exams. When asked about times they felt most proud of themselves, Megan, Simon and Lilly's responses were centred around attainment and achievement:

> ***Lilly:*** *'Probably when I had this English assessment, and I did really well on it, this was recently in English I got err, I got quite a high grade compared to a lot of people in that class and that made me quite proud of myself.'*

Participants felt more motivated to attend school on days when they had their favourite lessons. When asked about school-related factors which help them to attend, Ava and Frankie responded:

> ***Ava:*** *'Being with my friends, knowing I'm going to PE.'*

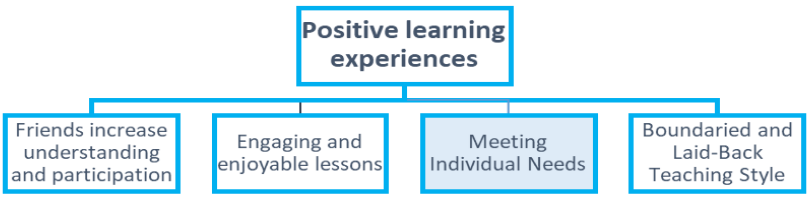
> ***Frankie:*** *'Only when I've got lessons that I like'*

Lilly shared that her favourite lessons motivate her to attend school even when she is feeling unwell. Conversely, William explained that he found it more difficult to attend school on days when he had less enjoyable lessons:

> ***Lilly:*** *'even if I'm feeling a bit ill, I usually try and come in when I have Sociology because I really like Sociology because I find that really interesting.'*

> ***William:*** *'there's some days I don't feel like I can be bothered...When you've got like, DT, English, Science, Music and then I just don't want to come in 'cause I've got awful day'.*

4.3.2.3. Sub Theme 3-Meeting Individual Needs



Within participant interviews, a range of individual needs were discussed. Participants shared their experiences of literacy difficulties, feelings of panic and anxiety and difficulties transitioning into school. Participants discussed the impact of missed learning contributing to concerns about falling behind their peers. Positive learning experiences occurred where individual needs had been well understood and met within the school environment.

Receiving general support in lessons was highlighted as important by many participants. Lilly found that teachers who simplified instructions and allowed pupils to talk with their peers supported her understanding in lessons:

> ***Lilly:*** *'she has the board of what we're doing which is kind of a bit more detailed, but then she explains it as well, more kind of simplified so that were sure what we're doing. And obviously you're allowed to talk with your friends so you can ask them for help.'*

In addition, support to meet participants' specific needs was valued. Frankie shared that receiving literacy support from a teaching assistant in certain lessons contributed to positive learning experiences and Simon spoke about the importance of additional support and opportunities to catch up on work he had missed due to PSNA:

> ***Simon:*** *'They get me back on track because, obviously, I have lost the time, so they can't go through in the same detail as well or else I will always be behind. So, they help me out a bit, they give me like that lesson to catch up and it's just nice to be able to do that and know that it's not all just lost if I had a bad week or whatever.'*

As discussed in subtheme ***feeling known, understood and valued,*** William and Simon found that support from a trusted adult to transition into the school supported their attendance. William found it helpful to be met in reception and taken to the office of this adult before joining his class for second lesson:

> ***William:*** *'he normally meet me if I go in, down in reception. And then, and then I'll go into his office and sit down…If I miss, like the first, if it's like 20 minutes or less for the first lesson then I sit on his desk and normally do homework and then I'll go back to class for the second one.'*

Feeling safe and secure in school has been discussed within Theme 1 (***the importance of positive relationships***). In addition to the impact of having trusted adults in school, the school environment itself was highlighted as contributing to the feelings of safety required for a positive learning experience. Having safe spaces within the school environment and provision to access these spaces was felt by Emma to improve wellbeing and reduce her anxiety:

> ***Emma:*** *'most of the time I think about what would I do if I didn't have the Hub… I think that, "oh no I've got a lesson that I'm really anxious for, I'll just try first 10 minutes and go to the Hub". But I think that if, if I didn't have that what what would I do?'*

For Emma, knowing that she had access to the safe base of the Hub, increased her confidence to attend her mainstream classroom with the knowledge that she could show teachers an exit card to communicate that she was leaving the classroom to go to the Hub:

***Emma**: 'I think the exit card and the Hub do help as well because I can easily just leave at any point if I need to. And just say I'm having a really terrible day… can I just stay in here for the last couple of lessons'*

4.3.2.4. Sub Theme 4-Boundaried and Laid-Back Teaching Style

The impact of personal qualities and teaching style on participants' learning experience and enjoyment of school was identified as a subtheme. In line with subtheme ***approachable and available trusted adults,*** teachers were perceived positively by participants if they were good-humoured, friendly, patient and understanding. Participants favoured teaching styles which were boundaried and fair whilst teachers who were perceived as strict, lacking behaviour management skills or treated pupils unfairly were viewed negatively.

Ava described her favourite teachers as: '*nice, they're not strict and they laugh around with us'.* Several participants used phrases such as '*laid-back'* and *'easy-going'* to describe teachers who were friendly, used humour and allowed pupils to talk in lessons. As outlined previously, participants felt more able to approach staff of this nature with questions to support their learning:

***Lilly:** 'If the teacher's kind of easy-going like with my photography teacher he's really kind of laid-back, I guess, easy to talk to so… It's easy to ask him for help and stuff'*

Picture 2: Favourite teachers

Teachers with the above qualities were respected and perceived by participants to create learning environments where participants felt internally motivated to learn and complete the tasks set without having to be prompted to do so:

***Lilly:** 'the teacher, he isn't very like "you can't talk" like my geography teacher, you can still have fun in that lesson. But you also get stuff done. But he doesn't kind of, say, you have to get stuff done, you just do it.'*

A positive learning environment was described by participants as one in which pupils can have some fun whilst being able to concentrate and complete their work without too much distraction from

disruptive behaviour. Most participants valued the use of humour in lessons, Lilly felt that it was important to balance a fun learning environment with clear teacher expectations:

> ***Lilly:*** *'she's easy to get along with, she can still make, you can still make jokes and have fun in that class without getting told off all the time. But she also says that you have to do your work otherwise, you can get a consequence.'*

This was echoed by Emma, who felt that clear boundaries in a classroom were important to manage pupil behaviour:

> ***Emma:*** *'if you still have a little bit of a boundary it might be quite a lot better than having everyone mess around the whole lesson.'*

As outlined in subtheme ***meeting individual needs***, participants perceptions of school were influenced by whether they felt their unique situations were understood by school staff. Learning environments were felt to be enhanced when teachers were flexible and made adaptations to class or school rules and expectations to account for pupils' needs. Simon outlined some of the ways he felt teaching staff had made adaptations for him:

> ***Simon:*** *'if you tell a nice teacher that you had a bad day, they might not call on you. Make you stand up in front of the class, make you speak. They won't get really strict and mad at you if you don't do a little bit of work. Or maybe if you're talking or something, they'll be a bit more lenient, tell you to stop instead of giving you a warning straight away.'*

Simon went on to explain the value of having his individual needs understood and of having a teacher to advocate on his behalf and adapt school rules to be fair on him:

> ***Simon:*** *'Mr Stevens … he helps in that way, with late detentions at the moment because I'm, I find it hard to get into school he, he wipes them because he understands problems getting in… So, it's sort of like a punishment for something that's not your fault really. And that punishment is long and making it worse...it's a spiral… And that's what happened, for about two-three weeks I was in a spiral and I just couldn't get out of it had a really bad couple of weeks.'*

4.3.2.5. Theme Summary

Within this theme when considering ***the best of what has been*** participants felt that sitting next to friends, having access to interesting and enjoyable lessons and being taught by staff who balance a fun learning environment with clear boundaries and expectations and who meet their individual needs contributed to positive learning experiences and increased their attendance.

4.4. Research Question 1: Discussion of Findings

RQ1: What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance?

This section presents a discussion of the findings arising from research question 1. First, the research findings will be summarised, before the data are interpreted and discussed against a backdrop of the existing literature which explores the perceptions of pupils, parents and professionals in relation to PSNA.

Summary of findings: Appreciating the best of what is…

Pupils perceived a range of factors as working well within their schools. The school-related factors that pupils considered as contributing toward their attendance were centred around two broad concepts; positive relationships and positive learning experiences. School systems that supported the opportunity for connections to be developed between pupils, their peers and adults were seen to be contributing toward school enjoyment and feeling understood, valued and safe. Similarly, a positive learning environment where pupils could sit with friends, access enjoyable lessons, have their individual needs met and be taught by staff who balance a fun learning environment with clear expectations and boundaries, were considered to increase motivation to attend.

4.4.1. Positive Relationships

Friendships

Having friends in school was felt to be a central factor for supporting the attendance of all participants in this research. As found by Nuttall & Woods (2013) and Beckles (2014), friends were perceived to play an important part in pupils' enjoyment of school by contributing to positive experiences in lessons and during free time. In the present study, friendships were perceived to support attendance in several ways: the sense of connection and belonging which came from being part of a friendship group was considered to reduce feelings of social isolation and loneliness; feeling able to confide in friends about worries supported pupil wellbeing and contributed to feelings of safety, and friends provided encouragement and motivation for attendance on days when pupils were finding this difficult.

These findings along with the wealth of literature which links the absence of positive peer relationship with PSNA highlight the importance of schools providing opportunities for pupils experiencing PSNA to develop and maintain friendships in school, especially as it seems that pupils experiencing PSNA typically find it more difficult to make and keep friends (Egger et al, 2003; Dannow et al, 2018; Malcolm et al, 2003). In the present study, participants felt more confident participating when sitting next to friends and were more comfortable sharing their personal

experiences of PSNA with friends than with adults in school. This may indicate a role for the involvement of friends in interventions to support attendance, although it would be important honour individual pupils' preferences regarding this and issues of roles and boundaries between staff and pupils would need to be considered.

Key adults in school

Previous research suggests that it is important to pupils that key adults in school are kind, welcoming, understanding and supportive (Beckles, 2014; Wilkins, 2008), traits that are often considered important for effective relationship building (Rogers, 1965). These findings are synonymous with those of Gase et al, (2016), Nuttall and Woods (2013) and Mortimer (2018) who also found that the knowledge, experience and skills of professionals contribute to the development of trusting relationships. The role and experience of staff have also been found to be important in the present research with participants reporting that having trusting interpersonal relationships with key adults in school supported their attendance. One participant, in particular, reported feeling that her needs were better understood by staff who had prior experience supporting pupils with similar needs.

The consistency of approach by key adults and the use of physical contact were considered to increase feelings of belonging by participants in the present research. Participants' most positive school experiences related to primary school where having the same teacher and being hugged contributed to feelings of community and family which helped pupils to feel secure. Experiencing a sense of belonging has long been recognised as a basic human need (i.e. Maslow, 1943) and research to date suggests that a low sense of school belonging can contribute to lack of engagement in school and poor attendance (Korpershoek et al, 2019; Tillery et al, 2013) whilst a sense of school belonging can increase resilience (Roffey, 2016). Pupils experiencing PSNA may, therefore, benefit from regular contact with consistent key adults who possess the appropriate qualities, skills and experience. Developments in the field of neuropsychology have contributed to the establishment of 'Positive Touch' policies in many primary schools and findings from the present research indicate that similar policies may increase feelings of safety and security for some pupils in secondary school.

Participants also felt more motivated to attend lessons with teaching staff who had taken the time to get to know them and understand their experiences of PSNA. This helped participants to feel understood and valued. Beckles (2014) suggested that a lack of trust and connection with teachers meant that pupils did not always feel comfortable confiding in them or asking for help. The current study contributes to our understanding of pupils' perspectives as to what helps develop positive relationships with teaching staff. Participants expressed a view that being in small groups with a high adult to pupil ratio provided opportunities for trusting relationships to be developed. In addition,

meetings between pupils, parents and school staff provided opportunities for a shared understanding of pupil's experiences of PSNA to be developed, leading to increased support. This emphasises the importance of positive home-school relationships within interventions to support PSNA.

4.4.2. Positive Learning experiences

Sitting next to friends

Central to participants' enjoyment of school involved sitting with friends in lessons, supporting findings by Baker & Bishop (2015) this increased pupils' motivation to attend both lessons and school more broadly. School rules and policies enabling pupils to choose their own seating position were considered by the participants in this study to be those that were working well. Nuttall & Woods (2013) also found that sitting with friends impacted upon pupils' confidence to participate in learning activities. Additionally, participants in the present study felt that working in pairs or small groups increased their understanding of the lesson as they felt more comfortable seeking support from peers than the class teacher. Previous research suggests that pupils are less likely to attend lessons that they find difficult to understand (Beckles, 2014; Gase et al, 2016) highlighting the importance of considering seating arrangements for pupils experiencing PSNA. However, as highlighted by several participants in this research, sitting with friends can lead to distraction indicating that an individualised approach incorporating regular reviews may be required.

Engaging and enjoyable lessons

Participants felt more motivated to attend school on days when they had lessons which they perceived to be engaging and enjoyable. This supports findings that link a lack of motivation to attend with lessons which pupils dislike (Beckles, 2014; Gase et al, 2016). In the present research, enjoyable lessons tended to be congruent with participants interests or considered to build upon their strengths. Suggesting that lessons which are currently viewed less positively could be enhanced through strength-based approaches whereby school staff focus on what pupils are doing well, help them to identify their personal strengths and develop these within learning tasks (Lopes & Louis, 2009). In addition, participants in the present study suggested that teachers who utilize creative methods within their lessons and school systems which provide a broad range of subjects increase their motivation to attend. Academic attainment and future career aspirations were also seen to be important to the participants in this study and also to the those in the studies conducted by Nuttall & Woods (2013) and Baker & Bishop (2015), adding strength to the case for school systems to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

Meeting pupils' individual needs

Participants felt more motivated to attend lessons in which teachers had an understanding of their individual needs and their experiences of PSNA. School systems perceived to be working well were those in which interventions were in place to support individual need, such as exit cards and transition support. This type of personalised approach has been found to be effective in supporting reintegration back into school following episodes of non-attendance (Grandison, 2011; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). The present research extends our understanding of this by highlighting that information about interventions must be communicated so that a shared understanding of both needs and provision are held by all teaching staff if they are to be effective. In order to meet pupils' individual needs, Gase et al (2016) found that involvement must be sustained. Short interventions are unlikely to adequately address the complex factors involved within PSNA. Participants in the present research identified the most effective interventions involved ongoing support with transition from key adults and unrestricted access to support hubs adding further support to this assertation.

The primary school environment in which pupils know their classmates and teacher well were considered by pupils in the present research to contribute to a sense of community and belonging. This was also expressed by participants in Baker and Bishop's study (2015). Elements of the primary school environment appeared to have been emulated within Emma's secondary school in the present study, in the form of a support hub. Here, the consistent approach from adults and the nurturing ethos supported feelings of connection and security, findings which are consistent with research by Nuttall & Woods (2013). Emma believed that regular access to the Hub was highly important in supporting her attendance. Mortimer (2018) found that participants valued having a physical space to access if they needed a break and suggested that trusted adults being available within such spaces was key to their effectiveness. Emma's description of feeling that if she didn't have trusted adults to turn to in the support Hub, she would be carrying the 'weight' of her worries with her into lessons supports this assertion.

Boundaried and laid-back teaching style

Teaching style was also highlighted as an important factor by participants in the current research, who felt more motivated to attend lessons with teachers who adopted boundaried but fair disciplinary approaches. In keeping with findings from Beckles (2014), teaching style was considered to impact more on lesson enjoyment than the subject. In the present study, teachers who were friendly, used humour and allowed participants to talk in lessons were described as '*laid back'* and '*easy-going'* and this supported pupil engagement, motivation and learning as they felt more comfortable approaching teachers with these qualities for support. In keeping with the findings of

Gase et al (2016), participants valued consistent and appropriate boundaries as this improved class behaviour and enabled them to focus on their learning.

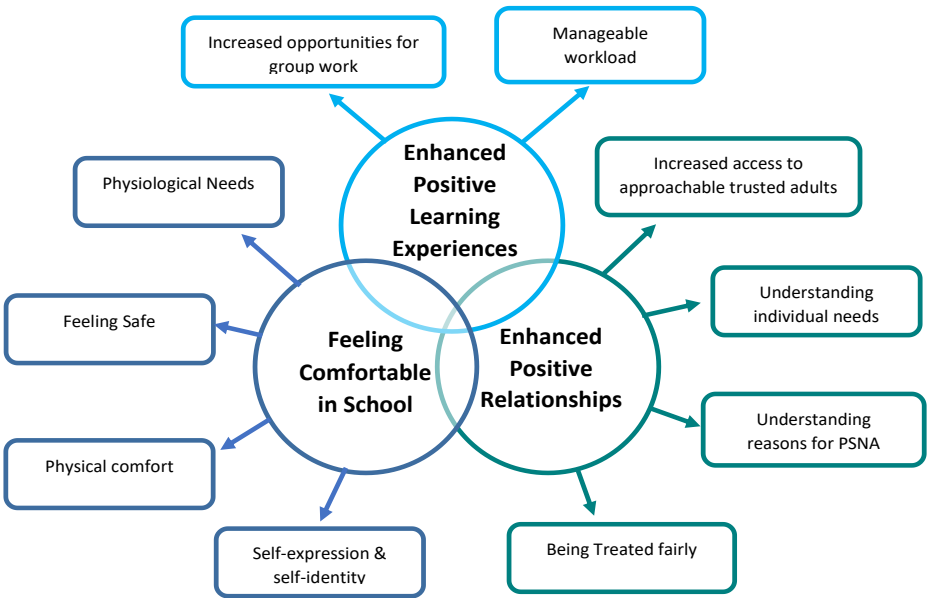
In the present study, teachers who took the time to understand pupils' experiences of PSNA and adapted rules and expectations accordingly were considered to support attendance. As has been found in previous studies (e.g. Havik et al, 2015), this included not being asked to speak in front of the class and in addition, receiving shorter detentions for lateness or incomplete homework were considered supportive. Beckles (2014) findings suggest that receiving consequences such as after-school detentions for being late, impact upon attendance. This was true for Simon in the present study, who shared that detentions were *'one of the barriers that stops me from coming to school a lot of the time'*. Simon found the transition into school difficult and the knowledge that his lateness would result in after-school detention, resulted in a loss of motivation to attend at all if he was unable to arrive on time. For Simon, flexibility within school rules and expectations around detentions for being late, such as a reduction in the time he was required to stay behind, supported him to emerge from a negative '*spiral*' that he '*just couldn't get out of*'. This will be elaborated upon within the discussion of findings relating to research question 2.

4.5. Research Question 2: Presentation of Findings

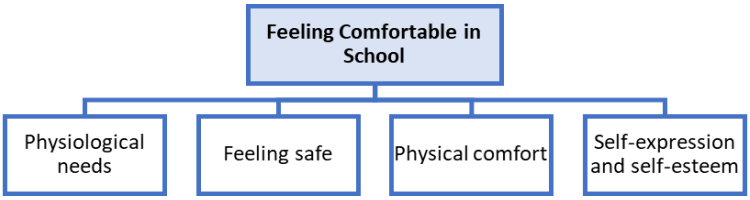
RQ2: What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to increase school attendance?

One of the benefits of an Appreciative Inquiry methodology involves its focus upon instigating positive change. In relation to research question 2, solution-focused interviews and scaling tasks were used to facilitate conversations about changes which could be made to participants current schools in order to increase attendance. Three superordinate themes and ten subthemes were identified in the data which were considered to pertain to research question two. These are displayed in figure 10 in the form of a thematic map.

Figure 10: Thematic map of RQ2

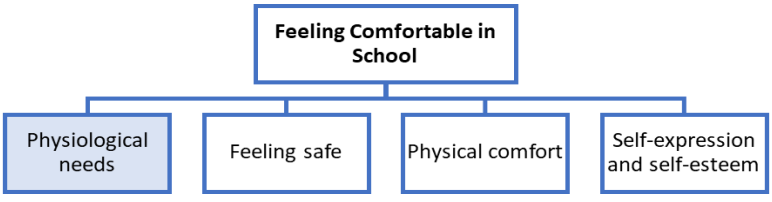


4.5.1. Superordinate Theme 3- Feeling comfortable in school



Participants used the phrase '*feeling comfortable'* throughout their interviews in relation to a range of constructs. In the context of uniforms, participants referred to both physical comfort and to self-expression and self-esteem. The structure of the school day was considered to impact upon participants comfort in terms of meeting basic human needs. Feeling comfortable in the school environment was also discussed regarding feeling safe. This Superordinate theme comprises four subthemes. The first subtheme ***physiological needs*** discusses how the structure of the school day impacts upon pupils sleep, eating and toileting needs. The second subtheme ***feeling safe*** outlines the impact of the school environment on participants feelings of safety. The third subtheme ***physical comfort*** describes the importance of pupils wearing comfortable and warm clothing. The fourth and final subtheme highlights the impact of uniform policies on pupils' ***self-expression and self-esteem***.

4.5.1.1. Sub Theme 1-Physiological Needs



The structure and timings of the school day were highlighted as important factors with regards to how participants felt about attending school. The start and end time of the school day, the time available for break and lunch and the time between lessons were all highlighted as impacting upon participants' physiological needs including hunger, sleep and toileting. Participants felt that changes which allowed for more free time in order for their basic needs to be met would support attendance.

Hunger

Lunch and break times were highlighted as being aspects of the school day that participants enjoyed the most. However, participants felt that insufficient time was provided to meet their physiological needs. Dilemmas were expressed regarding whether to prioritise spending time with friends, meeting to speak to teachers or to eat. With limited opportunities through the school day to speak to school staff, Megan described going without eating at lunchtime in order to receive support for her learning:

> ***Megan:*** '*sometimes there's not even enough food and if you spend time with teachers over lunch and you go to your food and literally nothing left. But if you do go at the start of lunch and get your food theres like no time left.'*

Several participants experienced a shortening of their lunch break during secondary school and recalled the impact of this upon both the school environment and their ability to access food. Lilly described how the increased number of pupils attempting to access canteen areas at the same time led to loud, crowded environments and long queues:

> ***Lilly:*** *'at the beginning when we first got thirty-five minutes, in year 8 or 9, a lot of people it took them a while to get through the lines and stuff, especially at the kiosk. Because we were used to having 45 minutes. With this 10 less minutes It was harder to get food and stuff. And it gets a little bit more crowded in the cafeteria now because we have less time.'*

William shared that he often chooses to prioritise spending time with friends at lunch. He recalled often losing track of time whilst playing football and didn't usually eat in school. William had developed a strategy to avoid busy queues and waited until the end of lunchtime to buy a drink:

> ***William:*** *'because then it's not busy. And you don't have to waste 20 minutes of your lunch'*

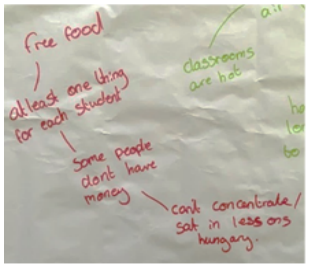
As a result of the structure of the school day, in particular the length of time available to pupils at lunch and break, participants were left feeling hungry and less able focus during their afternoon lessons:

Megan: *'I was so hungry and then when I was in my next lessons, I was moody and it's embarrassing because if the class is quiet and your stomach is grumbling it's annoying.'*

Participants were asked what changes they felt could be made to their lunch and break times. Alongside increasing the time available, the quality, variety and price of food in school were also discussed. For Lilly, she was pleased that her school had increased the vegetarian options:

Lilly: *'there aren't that many options and stuff, it has gone better since year 7 because they've added more like vegetarian options'*

Megan and Ava felt that food in school should be cheaper. Megan whose narrative around food suggested that this was something which often preoccupied her mind in school, spoke passionately about equality of access to food in school suggesting that in her ideal school each student would have access to one free item:



Picture 3: Feeling hungry in school

Int: *'can you tell me more thing about a school that you would want to go to?'*

Megan: *'Free food, I think with free food at least one thing for each student, you don't go up and get up five things 'cause that's not fair but at least one thing free.'*

Int: *'And why is that important to you?'*

Megan: *'Some people don't have any money. And then when they don't have money they can't concentrate and then they'll be starving.*

The school start time was also considered to impact upon the time available for participants to eat. William, who rarely ate in school felt that if the school day started later, he would have more time to eat breakfast:

William: *'then you have more time to get up, get ready, and have like a drink and some breakfast. And then you're not hungry throughout the day.'*

<u>Sleep and rest</u>

In addition to hunger, the structure and timing of the school day was also suggested as impacting upon participants sleep and opportunities for rest. Breaks were valued by participants who felt that these provided: opportunities to have time away from the demands of learning; experience freedom from the school structure; spend time with friends, and get some fresh air. Lunchtimes were described as opportunities to seek peaceful experiences away from the crowded school environment:

Emma: *'I really enjoy break or I have lunch and I and I can go sit and watch the birds and talk'.*

Reducing the length of the school day and having increased opportunities for rest were considered to impact upon participants concentration and attention. By shortening lessons and adjusting the start and end times of the school day, participants felt that they would be able to attend for longer, have opportunities to seek support for learning and feel less anxious. When asked what the impact for Frankie would be if the school day started at nine and finished at two (timings she suggested herself) she replied:

> ***Frankie:*** *'I think I'll be able to concentrate more, 'cause I find it really hard just to like try and just do a full day.'*

Simon also felt that increased opportunities to relax would help pupils to concentrate and recounted some research which linked sleep to attention:

> ***Simon:*** *'there was this test thing…they started school at nine twenty, instead of eight twenty, and there was more, more people able to attend and more people are awake and alert when they were doing their work…So, if you were to give us an extra hour in bed or to relax, that helps a lot...If we're awake, we can actually focus on the work instead of being sleepy. We won't be falling asleep in class unless we're up all night… it's better for us to concentrate and just carry on with the work.'*

Emma found the length of the school day demanding and felt that finishing early on a Friday would provide increased opportunities to access additional support for learning as well as increased time with friends:

> ***Emma:*** *'all of the anxiety and everything would build up and by the time I got to Friday id be like "I can't"... I think that would be really nice to be able to come home maybe spend time with your friends, and all still have the ability to stay to school and like say, "Oh, Miss can you help me with this?"*

<u>Toilet breaks</u>

An additional implication regarding the structure of the school day involved the time available to take a toilet break. Simon shared that teachers rarely allow pupils out of the lesson to use the toilet and that due to the short changeover time between lessons, the only time he felt able to meet this basic need was during break and lunchtimes:

> ***Simon:*** '*you have six hours of the day where you can't even go to the toilet. I'm not even allowed out of the lesson. Some teachers might let you if they can see on your face or something that you are actually desperate. But, I mean you can only really go during lesson*

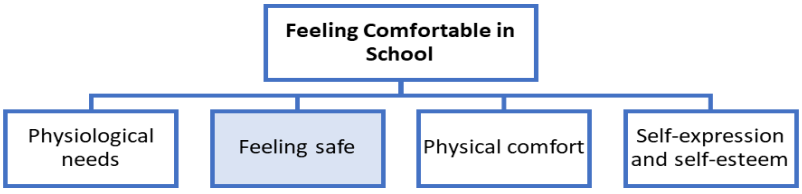
changeover which is literally about two minutes, break and lunch, which again is too short to do everything in.'

William shared that a benefit of being put on 'school report' was that you had additional time to use the toilet on the way to have this signed off, flagging a potentially unwanted positive aspect of this behaviour system for schools. William recalled having to run to his lesson in order to have time to use the toilet and arrive on time, explaining that pupils feared getting lengthy detentions for being late to lessons:

***William**: 'I sprinted half of the school the other day because I needed the toilet... because if you, if you're late you get a 60-minute detention.'*

Many participants expressed a wish for breaks in the school day to be extended to ensure physiological needs can be met.

4.5.1.2. Sub Theme 2- Feeling Safe in school



The large, open secondary school environment and apparent lack of spaces considered to be safe bases during free time led to some participants feeling intimidated and anxious. Megan who did not feel she had many positive relationships in school shared that she felt uncomfortable walking through school, particularly when her friends were not around:

***Megan:** 'when you're just walking through school it's a really bad vibe and just, I don't know how to explain it but I just really don't like it at all.'*

Emma also spoke of feeling intimidated within the wider school environment and like Megan, also felt more comfortable in the presence of her friends:

Picture 4: Feeling intimidated in school

***Emma:** 'I feel very intimidated, a lot of the time by students that are all popular and like "I'm so cool" and I'm just like "I'm so scared". But I just tend to stay away from people that are really mean. 'cause I feel like that doesn't really help with mental health...I think that if I just spend the most time with my friends and I'll be fine'*

Several participants suggested that separate areas for different year groups, particularly in year seven might help them feel more secure during the unstructured environments at lunch and break times:

> ***Lilly:*** *'in primary school we had this big playground for the year sixes they had a separate area…because it's kind of intimidating to be out with a bunch of kind of 15 and 16-year-olds when you're like 11, so if there was an area for the year sevens to go then that would be cool.'*

The sensory experience of school was also highlighted as a contributing factor to feeling unsafe. The large, often loud and crowded school environment was described by all participants as creating feelings of increased anxiety and claustrophobia:

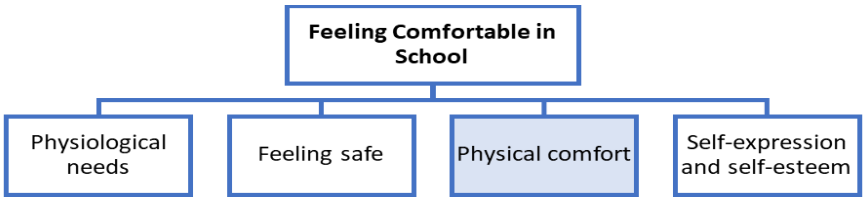
> ***Emma:*** *'I don't like when students at school are very loud. I think that noise, really doesn't help with like everything, I hate when everything's like crowded and noisy.'*

> ***Frankie:*** *'I can't deal with small spaces with loads of people in it'*

Participants ideal schools were described as being spacious and less crowded with longer breaks to help reduce queues and crowds. In addition, participants felt that the school environment could be improved by increasing the seating and spaces available during lunch and break and allowing pupils to access these during free time:

> ***Emma: '****I wouldn't want it to be silent. But it'd be a lot quieter, a few more like flexible areas that you can just go…so, you have the ability to move around and it's not too crowded.'*

4.5.1.3. Sub Theme 3-Physical Comfort



Feeling physically comfortable in school was highlighted as important to participants who felt that this increased their concentration and motivation to learn. Participants suggested that they would feel more comfortable in school if uniforms were made of soft fabrics and uniform poicies allowed for more comfortable shoes to be worn and enabled pupils to wear additional layers for warmth. Simon explained that his clothes from home were more comfortable to sit in for the length of the school day:

> ***Simon:*** *'cause we're sitting down pretty much for six hours of the day and if were in hot stuffy uniforms it's just not very nice or comfortable'.*

Emma echoed this view and shared that she felt that: '*it is important that you can relax in the clothes you wear'.* Emma felt that uniforms should be made of soft fabrics as she considered Itchy, uncomfortable materials to be distracting:

> ***Emma:*** *'if your school uniform is really uncomfortable then it might distract you in lessons. I hate when uniforms are itchy'*

All participants favoured non-school uniform days and wearing their clothes from home which they agreed were a more comfortable option to uniform. Lilly shared that when she feels physically comfortable this improves her concentration and motivation in lessons:

> ***Lilly:*** *'if you can come in what you like to wear like when we had non-school uniform…I feel like if you're comfortable and stuff, especially for me, if I'm if I'm more comfortable, I feel like I'm more motivated to do things because I'm not like fidgeting about.'*

Simon suggested that having a flexible dress-code rather than rigid uniform policies might help to strike a balance between the potential impact of bullying and feeling physically uncomfortable in school:

> **Simon:** '*I understand why schools do uniform. But I think we should consider how the students feel as well because some I'm not suggesting necessarily just go completely off and just wear whatever you want. Because that can cause all different problems like bullying and all of that. Just have like a sort of dress code like sort of like smart casual.'*

Feeling physically comfortable was specifically referenced by pupils in relation to feeling warm enough in school. Megan shared that she would be more likely to attend school if it was warmer, highlighting the importance of this factor on PSNA. Schools which had outside areas which pupils were required to walk through during the day and rules which meant that pupils did not have access to inside seating during lunch or break contributed to pupils feeling cold in school:

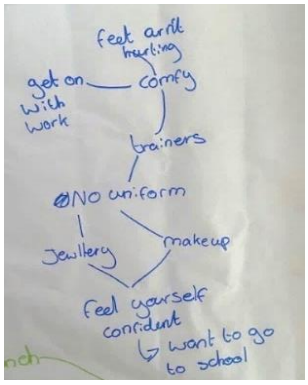
> ***Megan*****:** '*we have a section that's outside and everyone complains about that, especially in winter now and especially when people are not really allowed to sit inside the wings it's so cold, oh it's so cold*'

Participants felt as though changes were required to existing rules and policies to enable pupils to wear more comfortable shoes. I'll-fitting footwear were described as causing blisters and impacting

upon concentration in lessons. Megan described being in physical pain on the day of the interview due to blisters caused by her footwear:

> ***Megan:*** *'I have really bad blisters I have plasters on my feet 'cause of the school shoes'*

Lilly reported wearing her sibling's hand-me-downs and felt that being able to wear trainers to school would help her to feel more physically comfortable:



> ***Lilly:*** *'we'd probably be allowed to wear more comfortable shoes because at the moment, I have like slip ons but they're not very good for the winter so I'm wearing my sisters old ones but it would be helpful if you could wear trainers into school because especially at the beginning of the year when you're first wearing like new shoes or something, you get blisters really easily'*

Picture 5: Feeling comfortable in school

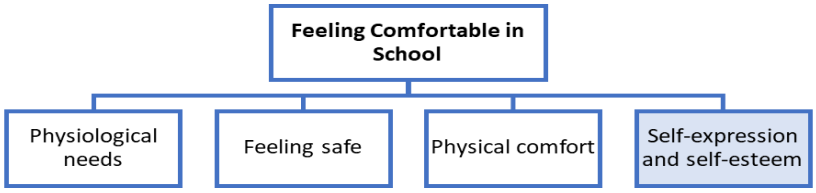
This view was shared by Megan who highlighted the impact of restrictive uniform policies and participants' socioeconomic status upon pupils' ability to feel physically comfortable in school. Uniforms were considered expensive and pupils whose families lacked financial resources to update these shared experiences of not having the appropriate outerwear to keep warm and wearing school shoes which were tight, uncomfortable and caused blisters:

> ***Megan:*** *'if you can like wear your trainers it's just a lot comfier. Because the shoes are wearing the soul was like so thin, and like I can feel all of the stones on the bottom of my shoe and my mum hasn't got the money to get me new shoes all the time and every time they break, get new shoes'*

Megan advocated that if school uniform is a requirement, pupils should receive financial support toward this:

> ***Megan:*** *'If we're gonna have uniforms should be at least a bit cheaper or at least free.'*

4.5.1.4. Sub Theme 4-Self-expression and self-esteem



Uniform rules and *policies were also discussed with reference to participants self-expression and wanting to feel more 'at home'* and *'like themselves'* in school. Simon shared that he found it easier to attend school on non-uniform days, explaining that he felt more comfortable generally and found this to be an opportunity to express himself:

> ***Simon:*** *'I guess it's just nice to be wearing your own stuff.'*
> ***Int:*** *'How does it feel when you're wearing your own stuff?'*
> ***Simon:*** *'It's comfortable, you can express yourself, I much prefer it'*

Emma felt that self-expression through clothing was important and that she felt happier and more able to focus in her lessons when wearing clothes that she felt comfortable in:

Emma: *'if you can express yourself and show your personality by what you're wearing I think that it's important…I think that if you're if you can be comfortable in what you're wearing and if you're happy and you're, you can concentrate more on lessons because you're not worrying about this or this or whatever is going on in school'*

Picture 6: Expressing personality

Beyond the uniforms themselves, participants shared their views about school rules around makeup, hair-dye and jewellery. For Megan, wearing a small amount of makeup helped her to feel more confident about her complexion. She shared a personal experience of being instructed by a teacher to remove her make up during a lesson and the embarrassment she felt returning to the classroom. For Megan, the impact on her confidence and self-esteem caused by restricted access to make-up had a direct impact on her ability to concentrate in the classroom and affected her school attendance more broadly:

> ***Megan:*** *'sometimes when people don't really want to come to school is because of how they look, because I haven't wanted to come to school before because I normally feel comfortable when I wear makeup. And the school always tell you to take it off and if you don't take off, you're going to get a lot of trouble, you're gonna be put in isolation for the rest of the day. Some people have spots, some people feel so self-conscious and that's why some people can't get on with their work. Because if they put their hand up and talk then everybody's looking at them and then so much attention is drawn to them. So, people should just be able to wear what they want, and a least a bit of makeup, not like eyeliner, red lipstick, just so they feel comfortable enough.'*

For some, the uniform was felt to be unflattering or unstylish which impacted on their confidence in the school environment. Emma spoke of friends who found the uniform impacted upon their self-

esteem and suggested that more freedom is required to ensure that pupils feel comfortable in what they are wearing:

> ***Emma:*** *'she hates tucking her shirt in because it shows off her tummy because it's really tight … I know that other people could feel self-conscious about it. So, I think that if they didn't let you have the freedom depending on like on what weight you are'*

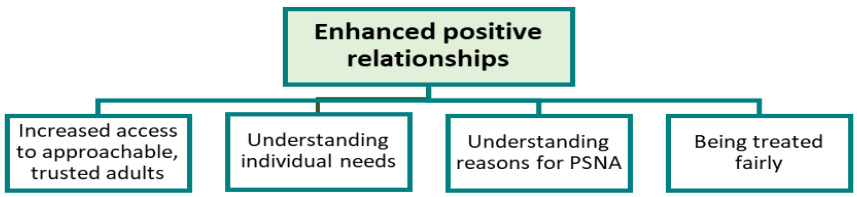
Megan felt that if the school rules and policies allowed for self-expression and enabled pupils to feel more comfortable and confident, she would feel more motivated to attend:

> ***Int:*** *'if you're feeling more yourself and you're feeling more confident, how do you think that might affect you at school?'*
>
> ***Megan:*** *'I'll want to go to school more'.*

4.5.1.5. Theme Summary

When considering ***what might be*** and ***what should be*** participants felt that the structure of the school day should be designed with pupils' physiological needs in mind, enabling enough time for sleep and rest, to eat and take toilet breaks. Participants felt that the school environment should be adapted to increase feelings of safety, that uniforms should be comfortable and that uniform policies should enable self-expression and promote self-esteem.

4.5.2. Superordinate Theme 4-Enhanced Positive Relationships

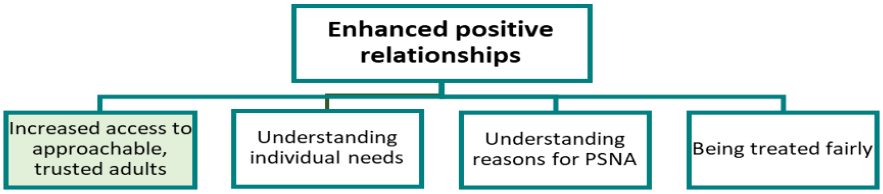


Theme 1 (***the importance of positive relationships***) outlined how relationships with key adults in school impacted on attendance for the participants in this study. This theme (***enhanced positive relationships***) summaries participants perceptions around how relationships between pupils and adults could be enhanced to make school a place they would feel more motivated to attend.

This theme represents four subthemes. The first subtheme ***increased access to approachable adults*** describes participants perceptions regarding the importance of having available key adults in school. The second subtheme ***understanding individual needs*** describes the impact of feeling misunderstood by adults in school and outlines participant's ideas regarding changes which could be made so that individual needs are met. The third subtheme ***understanding reasons for PSNA*** highlights participant's views about current attendance policies and how these could be improved

and the fourth and final subtheme ***being treated fairly*** describes participant's frustrations around disproportionate consequences and being treated differently to others.

4.5.2.1. Sub Theme 1-Increased access to approachable, trusted adults

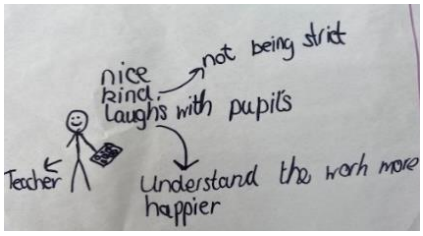


As described in subtheme ***approachable and available trusted adults***, participants felt more able to seek support for their wellbeing and ask for help with their learning, from adults who they perceived as kind, welcoming, funny, understanding and supportive. All participants felt that some adults in their school displayed these traits, however, participants shared that they would find it easier to attend if they could '*get along with'* more adults and if they knew where and when they could access key adults for emotional support.

Lilly shared her experience of attempting to seek emotional support for difficulties she was experiencing with friendships in previous years but feeling she had no one to turn to:

> ***Lilly:*** *'when it comes to personal issues, it's kind of difficult to go and talk to a teacher about that...In year seven I used to have problems with friendship groups especially, and I felt that there was, not really any kind of teacher, I could talk to, so I only tell my mum about it so it would be kind of helpful if there were more kind of teachers who were easier to talk to.'*

Although Emma felt as though she had kind and supportive adults to turn to in the Hub, she shared that she would find it helpful if the same qualities or approach were adopted by the wider teaching staff:



Emma: *'The teachers are very kind and supportive. And, yeah, because I feel like most people in the Hub that's their job but I think that if that just came with your everyday math teacher, then that would be nice.'*

Picture 7: Ideal teacher qualities

Emma also highlighted the importance of adults in pastoral positions being approachable so that pupils feel comfortable accessing support. She described the pastoral lead, in charge of pupil

wellbeing in her current school as *'stern'*, '*petrifying*' and '*not welcoming*'. This became a barrier to receiving support, which further impacted upon Emma's anxious feelings in school:

> ***Emma:*** *'if you feel more comfortable going and speaking to that person then it might be easier for you to sort out your problem quicker instead of it just it festering and building up and you're bottling up all these feelings I think it's really bad that you can't feel comfortable to go and speak to the head of that sort of thing.'*

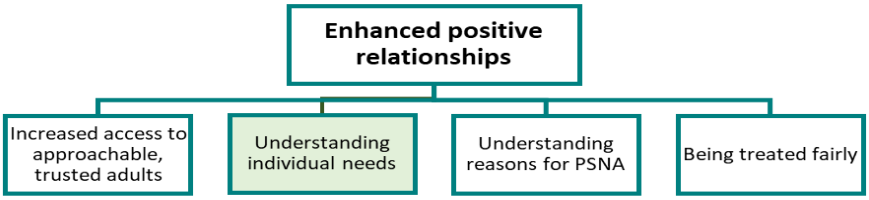
Systemic school issues in accessing key adults were highlighted by Lilly and Simon who explained that although they were aware that their schools had pastoral teams, they were unsure where to find them or how to access this support. Simon felt that pupils would benefit from increased access to trusted adults with whom they felt comfortable confiding in:

> ***Simon:*** *'they should be able to talk about stuff that's going on at home, maybe stuff that's happened in the teacher's class that the teacher needs to know about. And also, the work if they need to catch up or we didn't understand something in that lesson… so here, I don't know if there's a special group of people for this but just the pastoral sort of staff in general.'*

Lilly shared an experience where she had attempted to access the pastoral support team during break time with a friend but was stopped by an *'angry'* teacher who assumed they were *'skipping'* lessons which Lilly shared '*made it worse'*. Lilly suggested relocating the offices for pastoral members of staff so that they were more accessible to pupils:

> ***Lilly:*** *'Some of the teachers who are part of it, they're upstairs and at lunch, you're not allowed to go upstairs in the wings. So, if I guess if there were more kind of teachers or offices downstairs at lunches and break time to be easier to go to see them.'*

4.5.2.2. Sub Theme 2- Understanding Individual Needs



Feeling understood by adults in school was perceived as contributing to participants attendance. Emma, Simon, William and Frankie felt their individual needs were understood by at least one key adult in school. However, these adults held pastoral positions and had spent time getting to know them. Participants reported feeling less well understood by subject teachers which resulted in them feeling *'invisible'* in their lessons or misunderstood.

Emma felt that her quiet nature meant that teachers did not know her. As a hardworking, high achieving pupil, teachers did not always understand the knowledge gaps she had acquired through PSNA and called upon her to speak out in class which made her feel exposed and embarrassed, perpetuating the anxiety she experienced in classroom environments:

> ***Emma:*** *'I'm very quiet in class and I don't really talk to anyone at all I'm kind of a shy girl that no one really knows…I feel like when I'm in class, and they pick on me and they're just like "you there, you do this, you have to answer this question" I'm just like, "you don't even know my name!"'*

And later:

> ***Emma:*** *'they just put you on the spot a lot, which I absolutely hate, it's really embarrassing because when you miss lessons like I do, sometimes they're talking about something I'm just like "I have no clue what's going on right now"… I don't know how to explain it, but it's like you, you have to answer it and you have to get it right or everyone around you laugh at you and stuff.'*

Simon suggested that even when individual needs are known and understood by some adults in school, this information is not always effectively communicated to subject teachers which can result in a lack of consistency:

> ***Simon:*** *'I have a friend that has dyslexia and he gets asked to do reading a lot in class and when he refuses, he gets detentions, but he actually can't do it. And only the SLT team and only the... the sort of behavioural people knows that; they don't relay it to teachers properly so it's either the teacher has to email and that takes a long time. Or he gets, the teachers don't do that, they don't listen to him and they just give him detentions.'*

Participants had a range of ideas about how individual needs could be better met in school. Simon felt that additional support should be available for pupils with learning difficulties:

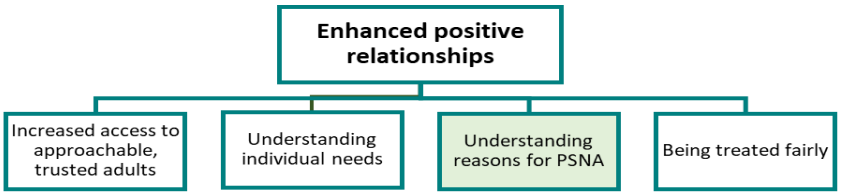
> ***Simon:*** *'what they already do is they have special cards that you can get if you've got toilet issues you can you have a toilet pass if you have, I don't know, issues with stress and anger there's a time out pass so you can go sit in a room and chill out for 10 minutes. But they don't have that for people with learning difficulties. They just sort of expect you to get on with it.'*

Emma felt that access to more '*small group work'* and having colour-coded cards which pupils could place on their tables indicating the difficulty level of work they felt comfortable receiving would support her learning:

Emma: *'if they maybe had red amber green as well so you can say, "Oh, I'm really not comfortable with this can I have the easier task?" or, and have different challenges and, sort of different levels for whoever feels comfortable with doing that'*

Emma also shared her view that individual needs could be better met by teaching staff regularly checking on pupils, taking genuine interest in pupils' difficulties and being flexible in their approach to meet these needs.

4.5.2.3. Sub Theme 3-Understanding reasons for PSNA



Key adults in school taking the time to understand the reasons for PSNA, contributed to participants feeling cared for and valued. A key difference between primary and secondary school was highlighted as the school response to PSNA, with primary school staff demonstrating concern and worry for absent pupils, whilst a more formal and detached approach was adopted by secondary school staff. Emma shared that she felt primary school staff were more focused on pupil safety and exploring potential contributing factors toward PSNA:

Emma: *'they were worried about how you were attending a class or why or if you were in trouble. I think it was nicer that they were just like, "oh my goodness, where have you been?", that they were more worried about your safety than your attendance to class… I just really liked that they put in a bit more of the effort to try and find out what's going on at home.'*

And felt that the response from secondary schools involved automatic warnings or consequences for lateness without this level of concern or attempt to seek a better understanding:

Emma: *'it wasn't like if you were late to the lesson, then they would tell you off, it's just like they would wonder where you were, make sure that you weren't in trouble and stuff. But I feel like now it's just, you're late, you get a warning, you're in trouble.'*

Participants expressed frustration with current attendance policies which result in lost privileges due to absence caused by illness and felt that attendance procedures in secondary school could be improved by taking time to understand pupils' individual circumstances. Ava shared that the current attendance system meant that pupils were being encouraged to attend whilst unwell to keep their percentage up:

Ava: *'they still expect you to come in when you're really poorly and then you're going to spread the germs around school.'*

Megan felt that fines for absence should be investigated and that losing privileges due to illness are unjust:

Megan: *'they should find out what they're giving fines for, if people on holiday, yeah I understand that but if it's already booked you can't just cancel it and not go, so there needs to be some sort of like agreement and if someone's really ill and always having days off school that's not their fault, they're just ill'*

Lilly felt that the current system could be improved by school staff demonstrating genuine interest in the reasons for PSNA rather than receiving consequences for a low attendance percentage:

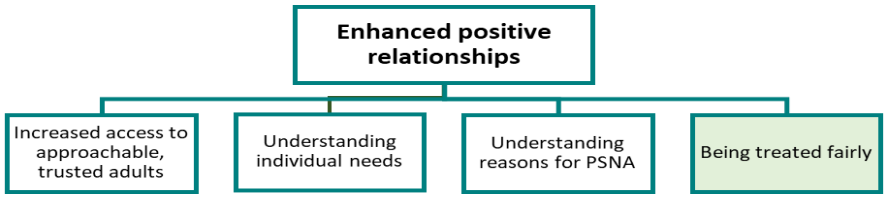
Lilly: *'If you had a low attendance in school because you were ill all the time and it was maybe because you were having problems with things and it got to a low enough point they'd start asking, "why are you missing so much?, are you having problems at home?, or not at home at school?" and stuff like that instead of kind of just saying "well you've had too many days off!"*

This sentiment was echoed by Simon who felt that receiving consequences for lateness could perpetuate attendance difficulties and suggested that patterns in attendance could be monitored more closely to improve the current system:

Int: '*is there anything that could be changed about the way attendance is managed at the school?'*

Simon: '*maybe if it's a one-off, getting the detention. But if it's reoccurring, make sure you understand what's going on. And making sure that there's no problems before you just give them detentions, 'cause that can just make things worse.'*

4.5.2.4. Sub Theme 4-Being Treated Fairly



Participants shared that they would feel more positively about their current schools if consequences were more consistently appropriate and proportionate. This was discussed in relation to adults understanding participants individual needs and the reasons for their PSNA as well as school

consequences more broadly. Simon highlighted the importance of consequences feeling proportionate to the behaviour being punished:

> ***Simon:*** *'let's say I was talking in class. I don't think that deserves an hour and a half detention after school if I get two warnings in class. But let's say someone's, I don't know flipped a chair or then answering back to teachers, that's understandable.'*

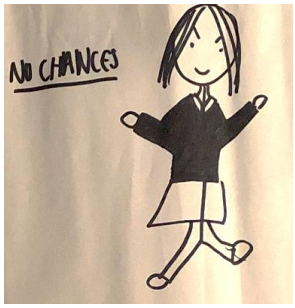
Simon, Frankie and Megan shared a sense of frustration about consequences being given to pupils for minor incidents such as dropping pens and not having the right equipment for the lesson. Simon felt that the school's consequence system was not effective when used to punish these occurrences:

> ***Simon****: 'So obviously, if you're doing something wrong, then yeah, but like, don't jump on someone's back if they've just done a little thing that's wrong. Like people get warnings for, dropping their pencils and stuff and making them pick it up and it's just not helpful at all.'*

This was echoed by Megan who felt that although consequences had their place in school, it became unhelpful when the system was used to give disproportionate detentions:

> ***Megan****: 'I understand you have to give like if someone's doing something wrong, I get that, but sometimes some teachers a bit too overboard. Even if you do one thing, they'll just make it in such big deal, and you get a detention.'*

Megan and Frankie felt as though they were singled out by some teachers and treated differently to their peers. They described incidents where they felt blamed for their peer's disruptive behaviour and felt that it was important for teachers to '*investigate things properly*':



Frankie: *'One of my teachers now, he gives me warnings for turning around, picking up my pen, if I drop it, I get a warning, if I walk into the classroom and breath, I get a warning… they just pick you, basically when someone else is talking, and then you get a warning when you're not actually talking, it's annoying.'*

Picture 8: Unfair consequences

Simon felt that unjust punishments were likely due to school staff misunderstanding pupils' individual circumstances and needs, highlighting the importance of the suggestions made in subthemes 1 & 2:

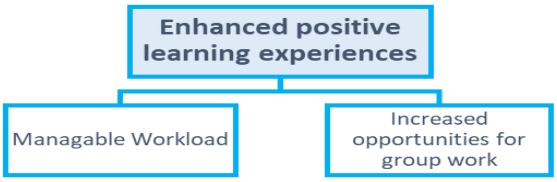
> ***Simon****: 'If you don't talk to the teachers, they don't know, so they're just gonna think you're refusing to go to school or your just being horrible. But if someone is actually struggling there's nothing they can do to stop it from happening. It's sort of like they're stuck and*

they're gonna keep getting punishments and consequences for something that isn't actually their fault, and they actually can't help.'

4.5.2.5. Theme Summary

When considering ***what might be*** and ***what should be*** participants felt that increased opportunities to access trusted adults and knowing where and when to find them throughout the school day would support attendance. Subject teachers taking the time to get to know pupils, their names and their individual strengths and needs were highlighted as important to participants who felt that this would enable them to feel understood. Participants felt that school attendance procedures could be improved by trusted adults exploring the reasons for pupils' PSNA, demonstrating that they cared about their wellbeing and taking action to adjust school rules and policies to meet their individual needs.

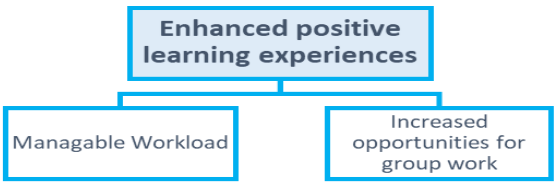
4.5.3. Superordinate Theme 5- Enhanced Positive Learning Experiences



When asked about changes that could be made to their current school to help support attendance, participants drew upon their experiences of things which were currently working well (as discussed in the themes relating to RQ1). In line with Superordinate theme 1 (***positive learning environment***), participants felt that learning environments could be enhanced by being able to sit with friends in more of their lessons, having more friendly and approachable teachers and receiving the right level of challenge and support to make progress in their learning.

This superordinate theme presents participants' perceptions about ways in which their learning environment could be enhanced in addition to the views already covered within section 4.3 of this chapter which explored existing strengths within school systems to support attendance. This theme, therefore, represents two subthemes. The first subtheme ***increased opportunity for group work*** outlines participants perceptions regarding the benefits of peer and small group working. The second subtheme ***manageable workload*** highlights the impact of workload on participant's perceptions of school.

4.5.3.1. Sub Theme 1-Manageable workload



As previously discussed, most participants' positive school experiences were centred around primary school. One reason for this related to participants perceptions of the reduced workload in comparison to that required in secondary schools. Workload was discussed in relation to school-work and homework. When asked why they felt happier in primary school Frankie, William and Simon shared the following:

> ***Frankie:*** *'Well I liked my teacher and... duno we didn't have to do as much homework.'*
>
> ***William:*** *'The teachers are nice to us… and they didn't expect us to do a lot of work. Like loads, not like I do now, that's too much what I do now.'*
>
> ***Simon:*** *'it's usually the teacher a lot nicer, they're not on your back all the time because well you're primary, you're not expected to do loads of work, they understand if you're having a hard time.'*

Simon felt that the current amount of homework was unmanageable and left him with very little time in the evenings to relax and enjoy free-time:

> ***Simon:*** *'I personally get home around four. So, if we get three pieces every day, well, we're not we're not really getting to have time, until around seven-ish. And by that time, you either only have a couple hours to actually go out or stayin in, 'cause especially in winter, it's dark around six-ish,'*

This was echoed by Frankie who shared the challenges she faced completing homework alongside her sporting commitments:

> ***Frankie:*** '*at our school we get about 15 bits each week! And it's hard to fit all that in alongside my training and things.'*

When asked which three things would help them to attend school, Frankie, Lilly, Simon and William responded that being given less homework would help. Simon who reported receiving detentions for late or incomplete homework stated that he would find it helpful if more teachers were lenient and took into account pupils' individual circumstances. He considered one piece per day instead of two

or three would make this feel more manageable. As a year 10 pupil, Simon suggested that homework should be focused upon core subjects:

> ***Simon:*** '*if they want you to do homework, just do it for core subjects like English Math, Science. Maybe a little bit of the GCSE subjects you're doing*'

William echoed Simon's view about the quantity of homework, suggesting that one piece or one page per day would feel more manageable and Lilly shared that school would feel less *'stressful'* if the workload became more manageable. Frankie explained that due to her Dyslexia, it took her *'ages'* to understand the homework and that she did not receive additional time or support to complete this. She felt that she would benefit from homework tasks being explained more clearly and being given additional support to complete them. Frankie also suggested that receiving fewer pieces of homework per week would provide pupils with additional time to improve the quality of the work they are producing:

> ***Frankie:*** '*now if you don't do it up to a certain standard you get like a detention…only five you could spend a bit more time on it. By the time you've got 15 you have to like, it takes like, you can only spend like 5 minutes on it because you've got loads of homework due in the next day*.'

4.5.3.2. Sub Theme 2- Increased opportunities for group work

As outlined in ***Subtheme 1 (friends increase school enjoyment),*** participants felt most comfortable attending lessons where they sat next to their friends. For learning environments to be further enhanced, participants explained that they would value increased opportunities to work with friends or in small groups. Several participants expressed a direct relationship between sitting next to friends in lessons and their school attendance. Without friends in their classes, participants described feeling lonely and finding the lessons themselves less interesting and more stressful. Like Emma, the absence of friends in her lessons directly impacted upon Lilly's school attendance:

> ***Lilly:*** *'I have one person in my friend group who I particularly get along with well and whenever she's off it makes me not really want to go in… because I don't really like the class without them in it.'*

Participants felt the learning environment could be improved by increasing opportunities for peer and group working. It was considered important that participants had a level of choice or control as to who they worked with. Participants favoured consistency, for example, Emma shared that she felt 'panicked' when groups are 'muddled up':

> ***Emma:*** *'sometimes they do just dump you wherever they want to and stuff so I think that if you couldn't sit with who you feel comfortable with the beginning and if you work well I think that it's fair that you can stay with them'*

Simon, William and Emma all felt that changes to classroom layouts would make peer and group working easier. Simon suggested that by grouping tables together peers would be able to support each other with their learning:

> ***Simon:*** *'move the tables around a bit more so you can actually help each other a bit more... and make you understand.'*

Emma referred to the table layout in primary school and reflected that she felt that being grouped by ability made it easier to receive the right level of support from teaching staff:

> ***Emma: '****I really felt like the table system worked because there would be the, not the lower tables… And she would attend to them but if the high tables need more help, we would have'*

In contrast to these views, William felt that sitting alone supported his concentration and attention in lessons:

> ***William:*** *'the people sat next to you might distract you. And then if you get distracted, then it gets rid of your learning.'*

4.5.3.3. Theme Summary

When considering ***what might be*** and ***what should be*** participants felt that classrooms should be set out to enable effective peer and group working, pupils should be given choice and control over where they are seated in lessons and should be encouraged to collaborate within learning activities. Participants also feel that workloads should be reduced to decrease stress and enable increased quality of completed work and adequate time to relax. Participants suggested that support to understand and complete learning activities is important and that particular attention should be paid to the potential impact of PSNA on pupils' subject knowledge.

4.6. Research Question 2: Discussion of Findings

RQ2: What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to increase school attendance?

This section aims to further explore the three themes identified in relation to research question 2. It will begin with a summary of the research findings before the data are interpreted and compared with findings from previous research that explores the perceptions of pupils, parents and professionals in relation to PSNA. Although it may be considered unorthodox to introduce additional literature into this chapter, the inductive nature of this research made it impossible to tailor the initial literature review in anticipation of themes that might arise. A key theme did arise, namely the pertinence of physiological needs to PSNA, in response to this, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) is introduced within this chapter.

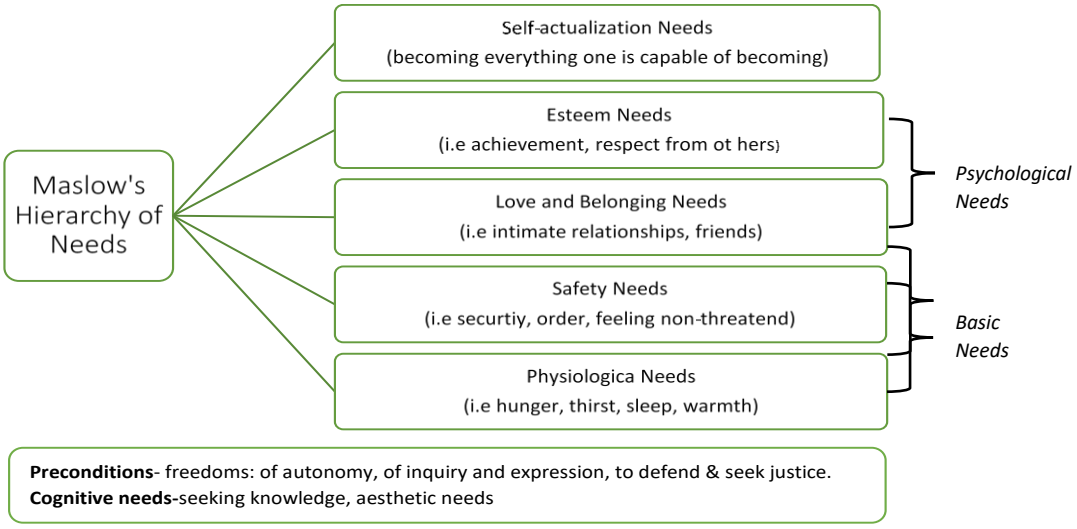
Summary of findings: Considering what could be…

The changes which participants felt could be implemented to increase school attendance were centred around three broad concepts; enhancing positive relationships, increasing feelings of comfort and enhancing positive learning experiences. Participants felt as though comfort in school could be increased by adapting the structure of the school day to ensure pupils' physiological needs are met and adjusting school uniform fabrics and policies to support physical comfort and promote self-expression and self-esteem. Participants considered positive relationships could be enhanced by increasing the availability of trusted key adults, ensuring that subject teachers understand pupils' experiences of PSNA and their individual needs, and adjusting school rules and policies concerning this. Finally, participants suggested that positive learning experiences could be enhanced by reducing workloads, receiving increased support to meet their individual needs and adapting classrooms to promote effective peer and group working.

4.6.1. Feeling Comfortable in School

Participants in the present research described a school that they would want to attend as being one in which they felt more comfortable. Feeling comfortable related to physiological needs, feeling safe, physical comfort and self-expression and self-esteem. Concepts which map closely to the need constructs within Maslow's Hierarchy (1943) (see figure 11), suggesting that pupils may feel more motivated to attend if these needs are met in school.

Figure 11. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943)



Maslow's theory of human motivation (Maslow, 1943-1987) suggests that:

- Humans are motivated by a hierarchy of needs.
- Cognitive needs and pre-conditions exist that affect human behaviour.
- Needs are organised hierarchically - basic needs must be more or less met (not necessarily fully) before higher needs.
- The order of needs may be flexible based upon individual differences or external circumstances.
- Most behaviour is simultaneously determined by more than one need.

Whilst the intuitive appeal of Maslow's theory of human motivation has contributed to it becoming one of the most prevalent theories in psychology (Wininger & Norman, 2010), a content analysis of the coverage of the theory within Educational Psychology textbooks (Wininger and Norman, 2010) highlights a range of common misconceptions which it feels pertinent to address. These include inaccuracies in the model's presentation, for example, the absence of the theories pre-conditions or the addition of these within the main hierarchy itself. And within the description of the model, including, a suggestion that lower-order needs must be entirely met before the emergence of higher needs. Each need is considered to fluctuate in strength at various times (Maslow, 1987). Previous research in the area of PSNA has referred to this model and drawn attention to the relevance of safety, belonging and esteem needs to school attendance (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). The present research extends this understanding by illuminating the link between pupils' physiological needs and PSNA. In line with Maslow's later texts (Maslow, 1987), within this discussion I do not intend to suggest that the order of needs is rigid or that schools should place higher importance on meeting

pupils' basic needs above their psychological needs, as the value of these needs is likely unique for each individual pupil.

Physiological needs

The structure and timings of the school day were highlighted as important factors with regards to how participants felt about attending school. Previous research has linked long school days with PSNA (Archer et al, 2003), however, the present research reveals the extent to which the structure of the school day can impact upon participants' physiological needs including hunger, sleep and toileting. Participants felt that changes allowing for more free time in which their basic needs could be met would support attendance.

Short lunch breaks left participants experiencing dilemmas about whether to prioritise meeting with teachers, spending time with friends or visiting the cafeteria to get lunch. Worryingly Frankie recounted an experience where the cafeteria had run out of food by the time she returned from meeting with a teacher during lunch break, resulting in hunger and subsequent embarrassment when her stomach grumbled loudly in a lesson. This is particularly important considering the links between poverty and PSNA (Archer, 2003) as pupils may be reliant on the provision of food in school. The shortening of lunch breaks was perceived as contributing to loud, crowded environments and long queues to get food, creating an environment which for several participants led to feelings of anxiety and claustrophobia. This supports the findings of Archer (2003) in which school staff perceived school size and layout as contributing to feelings of anxiety for pupils.

Participants felt that changes to the structure of the school day such as starting later, having shorter lessons and ending earlier would improve their concentration and attention. They felt that such changes would enable opportunities to sleep and take breaks away from learning to relax and get some '*fresh air*'. Participants in previous research have reported difficulties getting up in the morning (Aucott, 2014) and noted the impact of sleep on their concentration (How, 2015). However, sleep did not feature as a factor contributing toward PSNA within these studies, nor was it mentioned again within the findings or discussion of their research.

Participants in the present research felt that the short breaks between lessons resulted in limited opportunities to use the toilet leading to feelings of anxiety. As discussed within the Literature Review Chapter, some of the underlying reasons for PSNA such as perceived threats can activate the stress response. This, in turn can cause somatic symptoms such as nausea, the inhibition of the digestive system and tightening of the abdomen muscles causing an urgency to urinate or void the bowels which arguably makes a special case for pupils with PSNA having regular access to the toilet. These findings suggest that changes to the structure of the school day such as increased time

between lessons with longer breaks and lunchtimes may be important considerations for meeting pupils' physiological needs and increasing school attendance.

Feeling Safe

Bullying was explicitly mentioned by several participants in descriptions of their non-ideal school, for example, William remarked: *'Umm... there would be a lot of bullies, they would bully other people*', whilst other pupils referred to feelings of intimidation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants' descriptions of changes which could be made to the school environment included those which focused on increasing feelings of safety. Features of secondary school environments including their size and the length of the school day have previously been linked with PSNA (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Malcolm et al, 2003). The views and experiences of the participants in this research extend our understanding of the impact of the school environment upon feelings of safety. For example, they explained how exposed and intimidated participants felt within large open spaces in school. Nuttall & Woods (2013) suggest that access to small, welcoming spaces during free time helps to increase feelings of safety, security and belonging. Participants in the present study proposed a range of further adaptations that could be made to the school environment to increase feelings of safety. They suggested that longer breaks and additional seating would help to reduce noise and crowds and that separate areas for pupils in different year-groups would reduce feelings of intimidation and support feelings of security.

Physical comfort

Feeling physically comfortable in school was also important to participants who described their ideal schools as being those in which they could wear their clothes from home. Participants clearly understood the purpose of school uniform and saw that uniforms have the potential for reducing bullying. However, they felt that changes to uniform policies could increase physical comfort for example uniforms could be made of softer fabrics, allow additional layers to be worn for warmth and more comfortable shoes could be permitted. Participants described itchy fabrics and the blisters caused by ill-fitting footwear as resulting in distraction and suggested that feeling comfortable would increase their concentration and attention. The impact of socioeconomic status upon feeling comfortable in school was also highlighted. Megan suggested that the price of uniforms left some families unable to update these regularly leaving some pupils without appropriate outerwear and wearing siblings' hand-me-downs. These are important considerations as pupils receiving free school meals are more than twice as likely to be persistently absent from school (DFE, 2019a).

Physical comfort has not been linked with PSNA within previous research that draws from the perceptions of pupils, parents or professionals. This topic arose during the ideal school drawing task where participants were asked to draw and describe their ideal and non-ideal school uniform

showing how useful this participatory technique can be for exploring the broader factors relating to the school environment. These findings make a strong case for paying attention to comfort levels in relation to school uniform and for finding ways to ensure that pupils are able to own appropriate school clothing throughout their years in school.

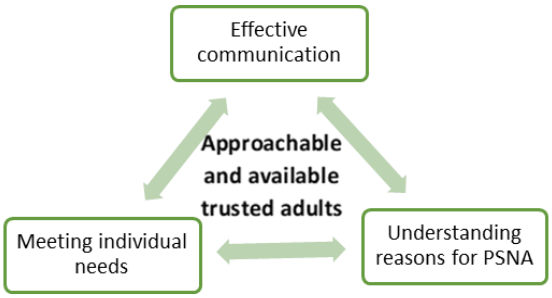
Self-esteem and self-expression

Uniform rules and policies were also discussed by participants with reference to self-expression and self-esteem. Alongside feeling more physically comfortable on non-uniform days, participants valued the opportunity to express themselves through their clothing which increased their motivation to attend. Low self-esteem has been found to contribute to PSNA (Archer et al, 2003). Findings from the present study offer valuable insights into the impact of rules and policies relating to physical appearance in school upon self-esteem. Policies prohibiting makeup to be worn were perceived as having a direct negative impact upon attendance for Megan who felt exposed and self-conscious without this. Being asked to wash this off and return to class was extremely upsetting for Megan who felt humiliated in front of her peers. Tight and unflattering uniforms were also perceived to impact upon pupils' self-esteem. Participants felt that to increase attendance, changes should be made to school rules and policies to allow small amounts of make-up to be worn and for uniforms to be more flattering to all body types.

4.6.2. Enhanced Positive Relationships

The second area of change in school that pupils felt could increase attendance involved enhancing their relationships with key adults. This theme comprised several concepts which the findings indicate could be linked in the following way:

Figure 12: Enhanced positive relationships



At the centre of the diagram and the component considered central to positive relationship, formation are trusted adults who are approachable and available. The findings from this research suggest that it can take time to develop trusting relationships with adults in school but that this is essential for pupils to feel comfortable confiding in them about their experiences of PSNA. Each of the components around the outside of this diagram are considered to influence each other. For example, effective communication is required between pupils and key adults (including parents and

school staff) to understand the reasons for their PSNA and this knowledge is important to meet pupils' individual needs. For pupils to receive the support they require across the secondary school environment, any measures for supporting individual pupils such as the use of exit cards must be effectively communicated to subject teachers and other key adults in school. This may be challenging due to the number of different teachers' pupils have in secondary schools but the present research findings suggest that this should be prioritised to support attendance.

Findings by Dannow et al (2018) highlight that attendance difficulties can persist despite positive relationships being developed between pupils and teachers leading the authors to conclude that relationships alone are not enough to support attendance. This is perhaps not surprising given the dynamic and interactionist nature of PSNA, however, findings from the present study may contribute a clearer understanding of the role of relationships in supporting attendance. As outlined in the model above, the formation of trusting relationships with adults in school is considered an essential prerequisite for understanding the reasons for pupils' PSNA and meeting their individual needs.

Approachable and available trusted adults

Some participants in the current study had positive relationships with key adults in school, but in their ideal schools, they wanted more access to approachable, trusted adults. As found in previous research, it was important that key adults were warm, genuine and supportive to enable pupils with PSNA to feel comfortable confiding in them. Beaver (2011) suggests that alongside core competencies such as these, in order to develop rapport, key adults must be able to:

- Understand that we each hold a unique model of the world,
- Be able to appreciate other people's perceptions,
- Effectively communicate that they understand other people's point of view.

This highlights the importance of considering the skills, qualities and experience of school staff selected to be key adults for pupils experiencing PSNA.

Increased access to key adults has been highlighted as supporting attendance following reintegration back into school (Mortimer, 2018; Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Participants in the present study felt that it was important for them to know where to find pastoral staff throughout the school day and when they were able to visit them. This corresponds with findings from Nuttall & Woods (2013) whose participants felt that knowing where to go during the school day to speak to key adults increased feelings of trust and confidence. Beckles (2014) findings suggest that time, staffing and financial constraints within school systems can prevent early intervention. Limited opportunities were provided for pupils in Beckles (2014) research to meet and build rapport with designated key adults and due to austerity measures, only the most complex pupils were prioritised for interventions to

support attendance. This illustrates the impact of the financial and political climate upon schools' ability to manage and improve attendance (Reid, 2014). Participants in the present study identified systemic barriers to accessing support, these included the structure of the school day limiting the time available to access pastoral staff and of key adults being located in areas of the school which are off-bounds during lunch and break. The importance of these issues for schools wishing to create positive change around school attendance cannot be underestimated.

Understanding individual needs

In agreement with pupils in research by Gase et al (2016) and Nuttall & Woods (2013), participants in the present research felt that it was important for adults to demonstrate genuine interest in them to gain an understanding of their individual needs. In the present study, factors such as knowing and using pupils' names during lessons and taking time to understand their experiences of PSNA were highlighted as important. Several participants had key adults in school who they felt understood their needs, however, it was suggested that pupils would feel more comfortable attending if the wider teaching staff adopted a more supportive approach. The findings from this research emphasise how important it is that information about the provision required to support individual pupils is shared across the entire teaching team, as illustrated in figure 12 (enhanced positive relationships). This also links to the subtheme of ***being treated fairly*** since participants felt that a lack of clear communication about pupils' needs could result in unjust detentions and consequences.

Grandison (2011) considered the potential implications for staffing and staff attitudes arising from the adoption of a personalised approach to support PSNA and concluded that the level of flexibility in expectations and systemic school culture could prove challenging for schools. Participants in the present study offered suggestions for ways in which individual needs could better be met within the classroom such as having colour-coded cards to place on their tables indicating the difficulty level of work they felt able to manage and teaching staff regularly checking in on pupils to see how they are feeling. Such approaches could reduce the requirement for school staff to remember and recall the individual needs of each pupil.

Understanding reasons for PSNA

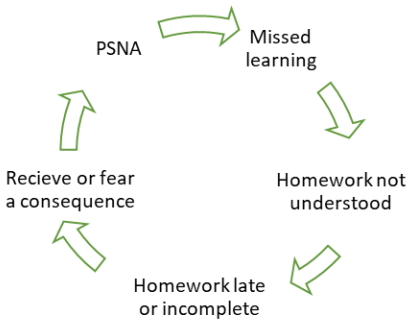
Another change that pupils felt could be made to increase attendance involved key adults in school taking the time to understand the reasons for PSNA. Participants felt that the default response of automatic warnings or consequences for lateness for PSNA was detached and punitive. These views are similar to those expressed by participants in Gase et al (2016) study who perceived staff as being disinterested in pupils' problems or in attempting to understand the reason for their PSNA. Gase et al (2016) suggest that this can lead to a cycle of disengagement, which was aptly described by Simon in the present study who spoke of the '*downward spiral'* he experienced due to a series of

detentions for missed homework. It was generally felt by participants in this study that further exploration of the reasons for PSNA would contribute to pupils feeling cared for and valued and lead to their individual needs being better supported. This finding further supports the Enhanced Positive Relationships model shown in Figure 12. Gase et al (2016) propose that to avoid PSNA becoming acute, a proactive approach is required whereby pupils' needs are identified by trained staff early on. Participants in the present study, felt as though it was their responsibility to seek support in relation to PSNA, suggesting that such mechanisms for early identification may not be in place in their current schools.

Being treated fairly

In support of findings by Attwood & Croll (2015), participants in this study believed that being treated fairly was important, expressing that they would feel more motivated to attend school if behavioural consequences were more consistently appropriate and proportionate. This was voiced in discussions about adults' understanding of pupils' individual needs, the reasons for PSNA and school consequences more broadly. Previous researchers have suggested that fearing repercussions for missed homework may contribute toward PSNA (Beckles, 2014; Malcolm et al, 2003). The present findings support this, as illustrated by Simon who said '*they get detention, they don't want to do the detention, so they skip school or they just don't attend at all'.* The findings from the present research indicate that this issue may be circular rather than linear as represented in figure 13: For example, pupils miss learning due to PSNA, they may not understand the homework tasks, homework may be handed in late or incomplete, the pupil receives or fears a consequence which perpetuates PSNA.

Figure 13: The cyclical relationship between PSNA and homework



Participants in the present study found that homework 'Apps' supported their understanding of homework tasks, indicating that there is potential for such applications in breaking this cycle in which homework and PSNA are causally linked. However, the sense from Simon was that this alone was not sufficient to support his understanding and avoid consequence*:*

'if they said… write a description and I accidently wrote about the wrong thing, they'd just give me a detention for that, even though it wasn't a hundred percent my fault'

This is a good example of a school's lack of understanding of the individual experiences of PSNA. Simon felt as though staff should attempt to understand pupils' individual circumstances and investigate whether the reasons for detentions (such as missed homework) indicate underlying unmet needs requiring support as illustrated by his subsequent quote:

'Maybe if it's a one-off getting the detention. But if it's reoccurring, make sure you understand what's going on. And making sure that there's no problems before you just give them detentions, 'cause that can just make things worse.'

4.6.3. Enhanced Positive Learning Environment

Manageable workload

As previously discussed, participants' most positive school experiences were during their time in primary school where they experienced less academic demand. Previous research has linked academic stress caused by high workloads with PSNA (Clissold, 2018; Dannow et al, 2014) with many authors deeming the curriculum 'unsuitable' (Malcolm et al, 2003; Finning et al, 2019; Reid, 2008). However, participants in this study indicated that when adaptations are made, such as reduced homework demands and increased academic support, this helps them to access the curriculum. Importantly these findings suggest that such adaptations would support inclusion for pupils experiencing PSNA. Pupils in research by Dannow et al (2018) expressed feeling overwhelmed by the quantity of homework they were required to complete and this feeling was shared by participants in the present study who felt that meeting the requirements of three pieces per day took up a considerable amount of their free time in the evenings which was *'quite hard'* and resulted in *'people getting detentions all the time'*. This is further evidence of the cyclical relationship between homework and PSNA as represented in Figure 13 above.

Increased opportunities for group work

As previously outlined, sitting next to friends in lessons was highlighted as an important factor in supporting participants' attendance. Pupils in Beckles (2014) study reported that opportunities for paired learning contributed to their attendance, and pupils in Nuttall and Woods (2013) research indicated that access to small groups supported their reintegration. Participants in the present study also felt that increased opportunities to work in small groups would further support their attendance. These findings offer a valuable contribution by giving voice to pupils about how classrooms could be adapted to enhance their learning. Participants felt that changes to the classroom layout, such as grouping tables together would facilitate and encourage peer working. For

pupils in the present study, it appeared that working with peers helped them to feel more comfortable attending the lesson rather than impacting directly on their academic outcomes. As might be expected, some participants felt that sitting with friends could lead to distraction. Social Loafing Theory suggests that pupils may exert less effort to achieve a goal when working in a group setting compared to when working alone (Gilovich et al, 2006) emphasising the importance of an individualised approach and regular reviews of such arrangements.

4.7. Research Question 3: Discussion of Findings

RQ3: What can we learn from the experiences of these pupils to help guide school and Educational Psychology policy and practice?

Within this section, a novel contribution to how the findings of this study might guide school and EP policy and practice is offered in the form of a model, a 5-step implementation process and an audit tool. The model comprises a five-component approach to creating a school environment which promotes school attendance. The accompanying 5-step process provides a guide for implementing this model in practice. The audit tool offers a framework for helping schools to consider potential adaptions which could be made to the school environment in relation to each of the five components of the model.

In keeping with the underpinning philosophy and the aims of this study, the choice of terminology and focus of the model have intentionally been focused away from individual pupils and toward the school environment, culture and systems. It is important to note that these models are based upon the views of seven participants and as such, should be seen as a useful starting point for creating a school environment which promotes attendance, and not as a solution to the 'problem' of PSNA. These models will be presented in turn before a range of implications are outlined for school staff and EPs. Finally, the implications of the findings in the context of the present COVID-19 pandemic will be highlighted, before the chapter is summarised.

4.7.1. Model: Creating a school environment which promotes attendance

Drawing from the findings of this study, a model has been developed which presents a five-component approach to creating a school environment which promotes attendance (see figure 14). The model is based upon pupils' perceptions of the factors which were already working well within their current school systems and the changes they felt could be made to increase attendance. The components are as follows:

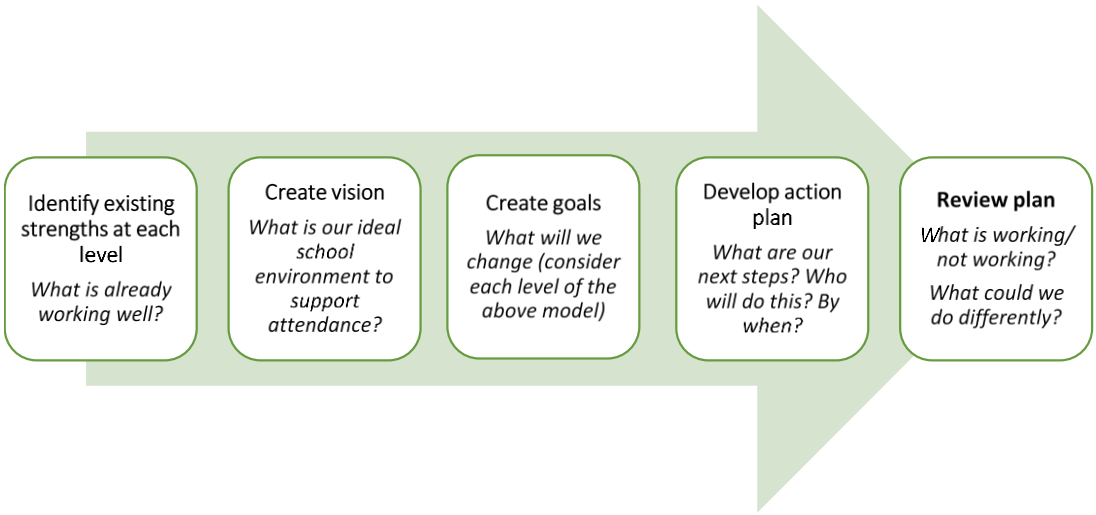
- Nurturing physiological needs
- Supporting feelings of safety

- Encouraging belonging and relationships
- Meeting individual needs
- Promoting school enjoyment

The model does not intend to suggest that its components must be worked through in any particular order when considering the school-related factors which may support attendance. Beneath the model, Figure 15 outlines a 5-step process for implementing the model in practice, in line with Plan, Do, Review principles (DfE, 2014). Each of the five components of the model should be considered within each step of the implementation process.

Figure 14: Creating a School Environment which Promotes School Attendance

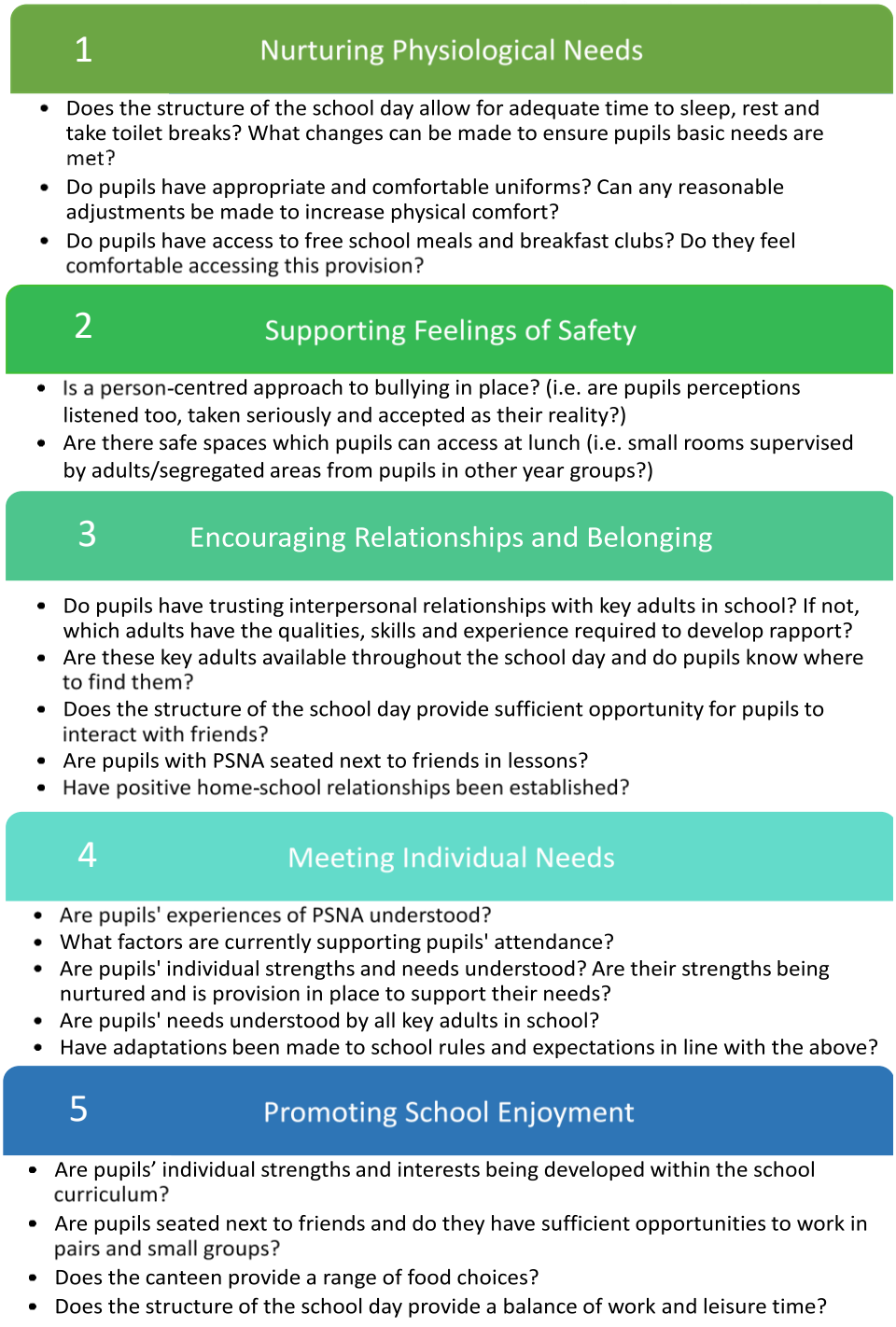
Figure 15: 5-step process for creating a school environment which promotes school attendance



4.7.2. Audit Tool for Schools

This audit tool provides a framework to guide school staff through the consideration of potential adaptations which could be made within the school environment to promote attendance. The questions provided are prompts and are intended to facilitate a joint problem-solving approach. PSNA is a complex phenomenon and unique to each individual pupil and it is imperative therefore that this tool is used alongside the views and perceptions of individual pupils.

Figure 16: Audit tool for schools



4.7.3. Implications

In light of the research findings and in reference to the above models, a range of implications are considered. It is not my aim to provide concrete, widely generalisable recommendations as this would be inconsistent with my research philosophy. In this section, I will consider what can be learnt from the present research in relation to the school-related factors that may contribute toward attendance. I will first raise some key points relating to each level of the model in figure 14, that school staff may find useful, before highlighting some implications for EP practice.

4.7.3.1. Implications for school staff

Nurturing Physiological Needs

Findings from this research suggest that to promote school attendance, it may be important for school staff to consider the impact of school systems and environments upon pupils' physiological needs. It appears particularly important to reflect upon the current structure of the school day and consider whether this provides sufficient time for pupils to rest, access regular toilet breaks and eat. School staff may wish to check whether pupils with PSNA are eligible for free school meals and if so if they are registered for these. Importance should be placed upon consideration of the physiological response to anxiety in relation to toilet breaks. Participants In the present study had clear rationales for the perceived benefits that shorter lessons and increased break and lunchtimes would provide (i.e. increased concentration, reduced noise and additional time to access support for wellbeing and learning), highlighting a potential role for pupil-participation in school planning and decision-making in this area.

In addition, the findings indicate that it may be important to consider whether pupils' uniforms are comfortable, appropriate and easily available and if not, what can be done to rectify this. Provision may include access to financial support such as uniform grants, reassessing current policies or making reasonable adjustments to existing uniform rules and expectations. In order for pupils to feel comfortable confiding in staff about potentially sensitive topics, school staff who have developed a trusting interpersonal relationship with the pupil would be best placed for this role.

Supporting Feelings of Safety

In order to increase feelings of safety in the school environment, bullying policies may need to be reviewed. Bullying is considered one of the most common contributory factors to PSNA (Thambirajah et al, 2008) and pupils do not always feel believed by staff when bullying is reported (Beckles, 2014). It is therefore important to consider whether pupils are experiencing bullying and if so, how this can be addressed. Person-Centred Approaches to bullying in which pupils accounts are listened to, taken seriously and acted upon would likely be supportive.

For pupils who feel intimidated in the school environment school staff may wish to explore how they can increase feelings of safety. Participants in the present study proposed a range of practical adaptations to the school environment to increase feelings of security. These included: access to small, welcoming spaces, supervised by trusted adults during free-time and throughout the school day; longer breaks and additional seating to reduce crowded, noisy environments and the implementation of segregated areas for different year groups.

Encouraging Relationships and Belonging

Having friends in school was perceived as being a key motivating factor toward attendance by all participants in the present study. School staff may wish to consider ways in which the school environment can better support the development and maintenance of positive peer relationships. Participants in the present study felt as though this could be achieved by increasing the amount of free time in school and enabling pupils to sit next to friends within lessons. Participants also felt more comfortable confiding in friends about their experience of PNSA than they did with unfamiliar adults in school and felt more confident participating in activities whilst sitting with friends. School staff may wish to adopt Person-Centred Practices whereby pupils are encouraged to invite friends to join them in meetings aimed at better understanding their PSNA as this may increase pupils' confidence participating in such discussions.

Findings from the present study, support a wealth of previous research findings which indicate that school attendance is promoted through the development of trusting interpersonal relationships with key adults in school (i.e. Grandison, 2011). The qualities, skills and experience of key adults are felt to be important for rapport-building and the development of trusting relationships and therefore may be pertinent considerations when selecting staff to work in such positions. Following Person-Centred guidelines, staff may wish to involve pupils in the selection of their key adult. The present research emphasises the importance of the availability of key adults with sufficient time to dedicate to relationship-building as this was identified as an important pre-requisite for understanding pupils' experiences of PSNA and their individual needs. The findings also suggest that it may be helpful for school staff to consider the role, availability and location of this adult in the school environment so that pupils are able to consistently access their support as required.

Meeting Individual Needs

Findings from the present research suggest that it is important for trusted key adults to explore pupils' experiences of PSNA and identify their individual needs. PSNA is best understood within the context of dynamic interactions between the pupil, their family and school. School staff will likely be more effective when they can spend time over a number of sessions exploring pupils' individual experiences in relation to each of these domains. It may be helpful for school staff to consider the

following specific questions: What are pupils' individual experiences of PSNA? What factors are currently supporting pupils' attendance? What are pupils' strengths and how can these be nurtured? What are pupils' individual needs and what can be put in place in school to support them? Has this information been clearly communicated to all key adults in school? (with the pupil's consent) and do any school rules or expectations need to be adapted to support pupils' needs? Particular attention may need to be paid to gaps in learning as a result of PSNA and the quantity of homework and level of support provided this.

Promoting School Enjoyment

Findings from the present study suggest that in order to promote school enjoyment, schools should look at the range of food choices available; the balance between work and leisure time and the breadth of subject options available to pupils. Additionally, creative teaching styles along with strength-based approaches and strategies such as identifying and celebrating pupils' personal strengths and achievements are likely to promote school enjoyment. Changes to seating arrangements that enable opportunities to work in pairs or small groups and for pupils to sit next to friends present further implications for schools wishing to improve school enjoyment for pupils experiencing PSNA.

4.7.3.2. Implications for Educational Psychologists

Educational Psychologists (EPs) are well placed to support the development of school environments to promote attendance in a variety of ways. EPs work at individual, group and systemic levels to support pupils, families and school systems (Fallon et al, 2010). The findings from the present study present a range of implications for EP practice at each of these levels:

Individual-level

A predominant focus of this research related to the importance of promoting child voice. PSNA is best understood in terms of complex, dynamic interactions between the pupil, their families and the school environment. Previous research suggests that pupils can find it difficult to articulate or explain the underlying reasons for their PSNA (Mortimer, 2018). The present research demonstrates the effectiveness of using solution-orientated, participatory methods to help elicit pupils' views. By focusing on factors which are working well and considering changes which can be made to increase attendance, pupils may be able to actively participate in the design of interventions to support attendance without any need to focus upon the 'problem' or 'causes' of this. EPs have the training and experience to facilitate the gathering of pupils' views using techniques such as the Drawing an Ideal School task and additional methods rooted within Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1995).

The findings also suggest a role for EPs in supporting school staff at an individual level to reflect upon and develop their own practice in relation to PSNA. Supervision and techniques such as Coaching may be suitable approaches for EPs to adopt in this area. Coaching uses a structured model to facilitate goal setting and action planning. Coaching may be particularly useful when considering the components of the above model which relate to encouraging relationships and meeting pupils' individual needs as well as more generally in regards to developing the confidence of staff in their ability to facilitate positive change for pupils experiencing PSNA.

Group level

At a group level, the research findings highlight the importance of the development and maintenance of friendships for pupils with PSNA. EPs are we placed to undertake this work since they possess the training and skills to deliver evidence-based interventions such as Circles of Friends which aims to develop a support network around pupils who are experiencing social difficulties. The role of the EP often involves working with the complex systems around a child to create change through a process of joint problem-solving (Webster et al, 2003). The present research findings suggest that pupils feel more motivated to attend school when their experiences of PSNA are understood, their individual needs are met and when these are communicated to key adults in school. Positive home-school relationships provided opportunities for information about pupils' PSNA to be shared with school and therefore an important role for EPs may lay within facilitation and consultation processes involving the pupil, their family and school. Through consultation, EPs also have an important role in supporting a shift in understanding away from a within-child or family conceptualisation of PSNA toward an interactionist perspective.

To create a shared understanding of 'what works well' to support pupils' attendance between key adults in school, EPs can facilitate interventions such as the Circle of Adults (Wilson & Newton, 2006). This approach provides a framework for joint problem-solving between professionals and could be used to bring together pupils' subject teachers and other key professionals to share good practice and positive strategies in relation to individual or groups of pupils experiencing PSNA.

Systemic level

The importance of considering pupils' physiological needs in relation to PSNA was a key finding arising from the present research. EPs are scientist-practitioners (Frederickson, 2007) and at the broad systemic level can undertake further research to inform education policy in this area (see recommendations for further research in section 5.3).

In addition, EPs possess the skills, knowledge and experience to provide training for school staff about theory, frameworks and models relevant to understanding the role of school-related factors

within PSNA. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) may support an understanding of the impact of unmet physiological needs upon learning, motivation and development. Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1973, Bowlby, 1969) may provide insights into the importance of trusting interpersonal relationships in supporting feelings of safety. More broadly Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems' Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) may enhance an understanding of the dynamic and interactionist nature of PNSA. The research findings relating to school uniforms, bullying, positive touch, and promoting a sense of school belonging present a further role for EPs within the development of school policies.

An important aspect of the EP role includes advocating for children and young people and representing them within multidisciplinary contexts. EPs are trained in a broad range of approaches in which pupil perspectives can be shared with parents, school staff and other relevant professionals, such as consultation, Solution Circles and in creative planning tools such as Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) (Pearpoint et al, 1993). PATH may provide another helpful tool for facilitating systematic change within schools in relation to PSNA. In this context, EPs may wish to facilitate the PATH process at an organisation level with a range of school staff (including decision-makers such as members of the senior leadership team). Pupil and staff perspectives could be gathered to form a shared vision for the ideal school environment for pupils experiencing PSNA. Following this, EPs could facilitate the co-production of an action-plan detailing the changes which could be made to support attendance within, for example, each of the five components of the 'Creating a school environment which promotes school attendance' model shown at figure 14.

4.7.3.3. Implications relating to COVID-19

Due to the national COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of pupils in England have experienced disruption to their school attendance. Schools are being encouraged to identify pupils who are reluctant or anxious about returning or at risk of disengagement and develop plans for re-engagement (DfE, 2020a). Findings from this research may inform these plans concerning the school-related factors which can contribute toward school attendance.

4.7.4. Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the findings of a thematic analysis of interviews with seven participants have been presented. Each of the five superordinate themes and their corresponding subthemes were presented using illustrative quotes from participants and then discussed in further detail in relation to the research questions and literature. A novel contribution to promoting school attendance was presented in the form of a model, a 5-step implementation process and an audit tool. Finally, the implications of the findings for schools wishing to make changes to support school attendance for

EPs working in the field were outlined and the implications related to COVID-19 were briefly summarised.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Research Summary

Attending school plays an important role in children and young people's emotional, social and academic development (Pellegrini, 2007) and frequent non-attendance has been associated with a range of adverse outcomes (Kearney, 2016). In an attempt to design effective interventions to improve attendance, previous research in this field has focused on the problem of school non-attendance, by exploring its perceived 'causes'. The existing literature highlights a lack of a shared understanding around Persistent School Non-Attendance (PSNA) with school staff tending to associate the underlying difficulties as being located within the child and family, whilst pupils and families locate the problem within schools. Findings from these studies have contributed to a widely held view of PSNA as being best understood within the context of dynamic interactions between the individual pupil, their family and the school environment. With this in mind, researchers have sought to understand pupils' lived experience of PSNA to inform professional service delivery. These studies suggest that individual experiences require individual responses and have illuminated the importance of listening to pupils' views to plan effective interventions.

Finnings (2019) highlights the need for practitioners to be encouraged to recognise the impact of school factors upon attendance. Despite the emphasis placed upon child voice within legislation, limited research exists which explores the views of pupils in relation to the school-related factors which motivate them to attend. Wilkins (2008) argues that this critical gap should be filled, suggesting that an understanding of such motivating factors may lead to school reform. The present research aimed to contribute to an understanding of PSNA by adopting an Appreciative Inquiry approach to explore pupils' perceptions regarding the school-related factors which support their attendance. Additionally, the study sought to instigate positive change within school systems, by listening to pupils' voices about the changes they felt could be made within the school environment to increase their attendance.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven pupils, from three schools, in one Local Authority (LA) in the South West of England. Participatory methods including the Drawing an Ideal School task and a scaling activity were used to elicit pupils' views within appreciative and solution-focused interviews. Through thematic analysis, five superordinate themes were identified, two of which related to research question 1 whilst three related to research question 2. A model, an implementation process and audit tool were created in relation to research question 3. A summary of the key findings of each research question will now be outlined:

5.1.1. Summary of RQ1

What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance?

The findings from this research suggest that pupils' perceptions of the school-related factors which contribute toward their attendance are centred around two key concepts; trusting relationships with others and positive learning experiences. A summary of the existing strengths identified by participants in their current school systems are displayed in table 6:

Theme	*Existing Strengths*
The importance of positive relationships	• Having supportive and understanding friends in school. • Time available to socialise with friends during free-time. • Staff taking the time to understand pupils' individual needs. • Provision in place to meet individual needs (i.e. exit cards). • Key adults who understand reasons for PSNA. • Regular access to approachable and available trusted key adults. • Positive home-school relationships. • Teachers who are warm, friendly, easy-going and relaxed. • Access to support 'hubs' with warm, supportive, consistent adults.
Positive Learning experiences	• Seating plans which enable pupils to sit next to friends in lessons. • Opportunities for peer and group working. • Access to subjects which are aligned to pupils' interests or build upon their personal strengths. • Use of creative teaching methods. • Boundaried but fair teaching style (use of humour). • Support in lessons to meet individual needs. • Opportunities to catch up on missed learning. • Teachers who understand pupils' experiences of PSNA, implement provision to support related needs and adjust rules and expectations accordingly.

Table 6: summary of existing strengths

5.1.2. Summary of RQ2

What changes do pupils feel could be implemented to increase school attendance?

Participants identified a range of changes which they felt could be made within their current schools in order to increase pupil attendance. These related to factors which would increase comfort in school, enhance positive relationships and enhance positive learning experiences. A summary of pupils' suggested changes are displayed in table 7:

Theme	*Participants Suggested Changes*
Feeling comfortable in school	• Structure of the school day to enable enough time for sleeping, eating and taking toilet breaks. • Increased seating and space available during free time. • Separate areas for different year-groups during free time. • Uniforms to be warmer and made of softer fabrics. • Financial support toward uniform costs. • Uniform policies to consider pupils self-expression and self-esteem.
Enhanced positive relationships	• Increased access to approachable and available key adults with the skills, qualities and experience required to build trusting relationships. • Clear communication about where to find key adults and when they are available. • Subject teachers taking time to get to know pupils, their names and their strengths and needs. • Provision in place to meet individual needs (i.e. small group work). Clear communication of this to all key adults. • School attendance procedures to involve trusted adults exploring reasons for PNSA, demonstrating empathy and adjusting school rules and policies to meet individual needs.
Enhanced positive learning environment	• Changes to classroom layout to enable effective peer and group working. • Pupils with PSNA to participate in decisions about where they are seated in lessons. • Workloads and in particular homework to be considered in relation to experiences of PSNA and pupil wellbeing. • Subject teachers to consider the impact of PSNA on pupils' knowledge and understanding and provide additional academic support as required.

Table 7: Summary of suggested changes

5.1.3. Summary of RQ3

What can we learn from the experiences of these pupils to help guide school and EP policy and practice?

In light of the research findings, a model, 5-step implementation process and audit tool were created which aim to provide a guide for practitioners wishing to create a school environment that promotes attendance. It is intended that these tools will be used to inform the practice of school staff and EPs. The components of this model refer to Nurturing Physiological needs; Supporting feelings of safety; Encouraging belonging and safety; Meeting individual needs and Promoting school enjoyment. This model, its accompanying implementation process and school audit tool represent an original contribution to knowledge in the area of PSNA made by this research.

5.2. Strengths and Limitations

Reflecting upon the research, a range of strengths and limitations were identified. These relate to the focus of the research upon child voice; the Appreciative Inquiry methodology and Drawing an Ideal School method; the concept of participation and ethical considerations:

5.2.1. Child voice

Much of the existing literature in the field of PSNA is based upon adult interpretations of pupils' experiences. The present thesis aimed to contribute to an emerging research-base which attempts to readdress this balance by listening to the voices of pupils experiencing PSNA, which I believe is one of its strengths. The methodology and methods selected within the study reflect my personal beliefs and values and were intended to empower participants to share their views, highlight their personal strengths and facilitate participation. The philosophical underpinnings of this study led to the selection of a qualitative methodology, through which pupils' perceptions were explored in detail. If followed too rigidly, interview schedules can impose a framework which concentrates on factors only perceived important by the author (Fredrickson & Cline, 2009) potentially limiting authentic child voice. Certain questions will have prompted participants to consider particular school-related factors which they may not have discussed independently within an unstructured interview design. However, semi-structured interviews enabled pupils the freedom to shape their interviews according to issues which were most important to them, within a structure relevant to the research aims and questions (Bryman, 2016). This is reflected within Megan's account of the impact of not being able to wear makeup on her school attendance, which arose from a question about school uniform.

The perceptions of school staff regarding the school-related factors which support attendance were not gathered within the current study. The incorporation of these views may have added further insight into the things which were working well to support attendance from a different perspective. However, this research sought to offer a unique insight into the perspectives of pupils and including other perspectives may have diverted focus away from pupils' views, as found within previous research in this area (i.e. Grandison, 2011).

5.2.2. Appreciative Inquiry

On reflection, I feel that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was an appropriate approach to address my research aims. This enabled the collection of data relating to existing strengths to support attendance rather than the barriers or difficulties pupils were facing. Social constructionism perspectives may consider these solution-focused conversations to positively impact upon how

participants view their current school systems (Houston, 2001), thus creating a more favourable interview experience than if conversations were focused on barriers to attendance.

AI recommends the use of positive and encouraging phrases within its application and requires researchers to utilize interpersonal skills such as active listening. As a Trainee EP, these are personal qualities and skills, I feel I have honed throughout my prior experience and training. The use of phrases such as 'that is really interesting, can you tell me a bit more' appeared to create a positive atmosphere within the interviews and likely contributed to the development of rapport. Participants remarked that they had enjoyed our sessions and one participant sent me a handmade Christmas card and book of poems she had written, which I feel was a reflection upon the positive relationships we had developed across our sessions. I wonder whether a combination of these factors also contributed to the retention of all participants across the duration of the research project.

The appreciative nature of AI and solution-focused approaches more broadly have been criticised for allowing insufficient time to explore the presenting 'problem' (Howe, 1996) which can lead to difficulties engaging in strengths-based discussions before individuals feel their challenges have been fully understood. This appeared to be the case for one participant in the present study who had recently returned to school following a fixed term exclusion and subsequently found questions relating to the Discovery stage of the 4-D AI model, which focus on ***the best of what is or has been,*** difficult to answer. In particular, questions about the times she felt happiest in school, led to short, closed responses within the interview including *'I don't know'*. This experience highlighted the importance of being given time to discuss and process her feelings and emotions related to the exclusion before engaging in solution-focused discussions. Bushe (2011) argues that it is not possible to inquire into visions of a possible future without considering the negative present or past and thus the non-ideal component of the Drawing an Ideal School task was included to minimise this challenge. On reflection, it may have been helpful to provide additional space to discuss participants' challenges related to PSNA within the initial rapport-building sessions. This could have been addressed by asking an open question such as "would you like to tell me a little bit about your experience of PSNA?".

In line with the aims of this research and due to pragmatic considerations including time constraints, this research only engaged with three of the four stages of the 4-D cycle of AI. The final stage 'Destiny' whereby participants are invited to use the outcomes of the Design phase to create new targets was not completed. Although this is common-place within the application of AI in research, this presents a limitation of the research as the 'Destiny' stage is considered important for the creation of positive change, a central component of the AI methodology. In order to address this, each school that participated in the research has been offered an hour session with myself (the

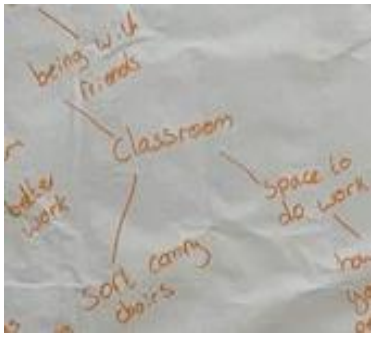
researcher) following research completion. The aim of this being for participants' views to be shared before the research model and audit tool are used to facilitate an action planning process in order to detail any changes school staff wish to make in order to promote school attendance. In addition, the research model and audit tool will be shared with the Educational Psychology community through a recently established school non-attendance working group, providing opportunities for organisational change to be promoted through the dissemination of these tools for practice.

5.2.3. Drawing an Ideal School

The Drawing an Ideal School task (William & Hanke, 2007) proved to be a useful technique for eliciting participants' views and visions in relation to the Dream stage of the 4-D AI model. Drawing tasks are considered to help children feel more at ease communicating their thoughts or the meaning of their reality (Ravenette, 1980). The combination of drawing, writing and talking encouraged in this task, supported the interview process and for most participants initiated detailed descriptions and stories about the type of school they would like to go to. The participant who found the appreciative aspect of the interview difficult (as mentioned above) was able to engage in this task which focused upon ***what might be*** in the future. In this way, the task enabled more constructive conversations than may have been possible within an interview alone. The original guidelines for the ideal school drawing technique, suggest asking pupils to draw an aspect of the school environment before sharing ***three*** things about this (Williams & Hanke, 2007). Although this clear structure is likely supportive for pupils with Autism, for which the technique was originally designed. I found this led to closed responses from some participants in this research, limiting their authentic views and insights. In response to this, I shifted my language within the interview schedule, omitted the 'three things' instruction and instead asked participants to "tell me about..." this open language facilitated the story-telling responses which are encouraged through an AI methodology.

This task also contributed to a limitation of the research. One participant chose not to draw her ideal school and instead recorded her views in a Mind-Map style graphic. This resulted in short responses as she listened to the question, wrote her answer and read out her notes, for example:

Picture 9: Mind Map drawing



AI as an approach encourages participants to tell stories and the strategy adopted by this participant potentially limited the data which may have been gained through interview alone. However, I wondered whether this participant experienced difficulties remembering the questions when presented verbally. She asked for these to be repeated frequently and her method of recording may

have acted as a memory strategy to guide her thinking. To increase inclusivity within these research methods, it may have been beneficial for questions to have been provided in written form alongside verbal delivery.

5.2.4. Participation

The research methodology and methods selected in this thesis were designed to be person-centred and to facilitate pupil participation. AI interviews are considered to provide opportunities for a high level of participation and promote a sense of ownership of the research process and outcomes (Shuayb et al, 2009). The use of participatory methods including the Drawing an Ideal School task (William & Hanke, 2007) and scaling within participant interviews, further supported the elicitation of pupils' views and participation in the research process, with all participants engaging in one or more levels of the drawing, writing and talking aspects of these creative methods.

Following the ideal school drawing task, solution-focused questioning supported participants to consider any changes they felt could be made in their current school to increase their attendance. As such, pupils participated in the creation of the implications presented in the Discussion chapter of this thesis, many of which were taken directly from individual pupils' views rather than being my interpretations of these as a researcher. In the present study, sitting with friends was perceived to increase pupils' confidence and participation in lessons. Person-Centred Practice encourages children and young people to invite friends into meetings if they feel this would help them to feel more comfortable. I wonder whether active participation could have been enhanced further in the present research by the inclusion of the participant's friends within rapport-building or interview sessions. This would, however, have implications for consent and confidentiality and may have influenced what participants felt comfortable sharing.

5.2.5. Ethical Considerations

Power relationships have been previously discussed within the Methodology Chapter, in reference to the data collection phase of this research. I was mindful, within the analysis, that, as the researcher, I now had formal control and power over participants' data. At this point I became the storyteller, choosing which quotes to select and in which order to present these to retell participants' stories (Bryman, 2016). I took steps to minimise these effects whilst conducting interviews where active listening skills, such as reflecting and summarising, were used to check my understanding of what had been said by participants. To further address this power imbalance, I would have liked to have established a phase of participant participation within the analysis stage of this research, by sharing my interpretations and asking for comments and feedback, unfortunately, this was not possible due to the impact of COVID-19.

5.3. Future Directions

This thesis builds upon the existing literature which gives voice to pupils in relation to their experiences of PSNA. It contributes towards a current gap pertaining to the school-related factors which help secondary school-aged pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school. The research extends the understanding gained by Beckles (2014) by taking a unique appreciative and solution-orientated perspective to explore existing strengths within school systems in relation to attendance and consider any changes which could be made. I feel that this provides a useful foundation of knowledge to inform school and EP policy and practice, although further research is required in this important area.

The present research was conducted as a component of EP training and was bound by certain time constrains. The methodological approach was designed with this in mind and therefore only 3 of the 4 stages of AI were engaged within this research (Discovery, Dream & Design). Elliott (1999) proposes that to create effective change, the full AI process requires long-term engagement with a range of stakeholders. The final stage of the model (Destiny) involves action plans and targets being created based on the outcomes of the Design phase. It is hoped that the model and audit tool created as a product of this research will support individual schools to consider changes which could be made within the school environment to increase attendance, thus creating effective change. However, it would be interesting for Action Research to be conducted within an individual school which follows the full 4-D cycle. This would further contribute to an understanding of how AI can be used to create organisational change in schools in the field of PSNA. To increase feelings of ownership, it may be beneficial for school staff to be included alongside pupils in the 4-D process within such research.

A unique feature of this research involved the association made by pupils between unmet basic physiological needs such as hunger and physical discomfort and PSNA which is perhaps an overlooked area within previous research. Zhang (2003) suggested a strong link between poverty and non-attendance in their mixed methods research, however, research aiming to contribute to an understanding of how we can support pupils experiencing PSNA to attend school makes little to no reference to this link. I was not expecting the rich detail that participants provided within this area and, regrettably, the scope of this study did not allow for an extended consideration of this. Exploration of this link within future research may be illuminative.

In addition, researching the views of pupils, school staff and EPs about their experience of implementing the model and audit tool developed from this research in practice would support further development and refinement of these tools.

5.4. Evaluating the quality of this research

The Total Quality Framework (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) was selected to guide and evaluate the quality of this research. An outline was provided in the Methodology Chapter regarding the concepts of Credibility, Analysability, Transparency and Usefulness. I will now return to these criteria to evaluate the rigour of this research and the value of its findings.

5.4.1. Credibility

Scope

Establishing and clearly communicating the studies inclusion and exclusion criteria supported the credibility of this research. Throughout the recruitment process, several gatekeepers made assumptions about the target population I was aiming to recruit. Referring to the proposed subgroups of PSNA, it was suggested that I wouldn't want to talk to certain pupils because their non-attendance was perceived as being 'truancy'. Having a clear definition of PSNA to refer to, enabled me to articulate that my desired sample included participants who were experiencing a broad range of difficulties with attendance, and encourage staff to invite all participants who met the established criteria into the research. This led to the recruitment of participants who I felt were representative of the intended population. However, the use of purposeful sampling likely led to several biases. One staff member commented that they would prefer not to send recruitment packs to several students due to the challenging relationship held between home and school. This led me to wonder whether the focus of the research being on the school system and environment may have led to the exclusion of pupils which staff considered may represent the school in a negative light. These pupils may find different school-related factors contribute toward their attendance; however, the findings are not intended to be generalised and for this reason, I do not feel this affects the completeness or accuracy of the data.

As outlined in the Methodology Chapter, I intended to recruit between five and ten participants and was able to successfully recruit seven, fulfilling this aim. Of the 18 recruitment packs posted by schools, seven parents expressed an interest in taking part and following initial meetings with parents and pupils all seven families were recruited. I feel that my efforts to build rapport with pupils, parents and school staff contributed to the success of this recruitment. One Page Profiles were sent in advance of initial meetings which facilitated opportunities for shared interests to be discussed. One participant enthusiastically shared their artwork and scrapbook which was a particular privilege for me and a real highlight of the data collection stage of this research. In addition, I feel that the appreciative nature of the research, the focus on listening to pupils' perceptions and the assurance of confidentiality contributed to participant recruitment and retention.

Data collection

The research aimed to understand pupils' perceptions of school-related factors which contribute toward attendance and I feel the methods selected, resulted in data which embodies this aim. The ideal school drawing task and scaling activities were not formally piloted within the research context. However, I feel as though the frequent and repeated use of these techniques within my professional practice has led to the development the skills required to administer these appropriately and confidently, enabling sufficient depth to be achieved within interviews which contributed to the production of quality data. One participant provided much shorter responses within the interviews than the others. The same level of rapport might not have been established with this participant which may have led to a less complete account, resulting in bias. In retrospect, I feel that additional rapport-building sessions may have been beneficial to develop the trusting relationship required for all participants to feel comfortable sharing their views and perspectives.

5.4.2. Analysability

I believe that my background working in various research roles and previous experience of transcribing contributed to quality within the processing of preliminary data from audio recordings into verbatim transcripts. In addition, a codebook was created which detailed codes and their definitions as these evolved. This enabled me to keep track of my decision making, increasing the standardization of this process. To further increase the quality of my analysis, intercoder reliability could have been achieved by enlisting a second coder to periodically recode transcripts to compare and contrast coding and resolve any discrepancies. To address this, I have ensured transparency within my Methodology Chapter and Appendix L about how themes were identified. Additionally, a conscious decision was made to use participants' direct words where possible within the labelling of my codes which contributed to the choice of 'feeling comfortable in school' as the terminology used for theme 3 as the word 'comfortable' appeared frequently within participants' transcripts.

5.4.3. Transparency

Within qualitative research, transparency refers to the openness of all parts of research design, recruitment, data collection and analysis (Roller & Lavrakas 2017). I aimed to ensure that I was being transparent about the decisions I made throughout the research process, many of which are detailed in the Methodology Chapter. To increase transparency related to the recruitment and data collection process, the interview schedule, a breakdown of the analysis process and an example of a coded transcript are included in the appendices (see Appendix L).

An additional component of transparency as defined by Roller & Lavrakas (2017) relates to the reporting of data. 'Thick descriptions' which include rich details about the data are considered

important to enable the reader to determine the applicability and transferability of the findings to other settings. Verbatim quotes from participants were used throughout the findings chapter and presentation of these was purposefully descriptive, whilst my interpretations of the data were presented separately within the discussion chapter to increase the clarity of my contribution as a researcher.

5.4.4. Usefulness

As far as I am aware this is the first study to use an Appreciative Inquiry approach to explore the existing strengths within secondary schools to support attendance, and the factors pupils feel could be changed to further support this. The research provides a model, implementation process and audit tool which are intended to be used by schools and EPs are considered to have made a practical and unique contribution to the profession of EP.

The research was conducted within three secondary schools in one LA in the South West of England with seven participants. The findings are not intended to be generalised across populations however it is hoped that the data from this research contributes to a broader understanding of PNSA to which other researchers can contribute, to form extended "pattern theories" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.5 Concluding reflections

I have found the experience of conducting this research extremely rewarding and I am grateful to each participant for contributing to my developed knowledge and understanding of PSNA. Through the application of AI, I have learned an effective way to implement the solution-focused and strengths-based approaches I use in professional practice, within a research context. Perhaps most importantly, I believe that this thesis gives voice to young people whose views are rarely sought and provides an insight into what we could learn if we listened to them more readily.

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Researcher: *So then thinking about the sort of classrooms that you would want to be in, can you tell me three things about these classrooms?*
Participant: *Umm do you want me to write it down or?*
Researcher: *It's up to you*
Participant: *Yeah, I'm going to write it, so a classroom?*
Researcher: *Yes, so three things about a classroom that you would want to go to?*
Participant: *Soft comfy chairs, space to do work and being with your friend.*

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7. Appendices

Appendix A- Literature Search Strategy

An initial search of the literature was conducted in September 2019 to explore what was already understood about the topic of PSNA and to identify possible gaps in the literature. A preliminary search was completed before this, to identify relevant terminology to include within the search strategy. The online database PsycINFO was searched using the terms 'school non-attendance', the keywords listed within relevant journals were noted down and additional synonyms were considered. The systematic search which followed focused on two areas deemed relevant to the research questions:

1. School non-attendance which included the search terms; 'school non-attendance', 'school absence', 'school truancy', 'school refusal', 'school phobia', 'school avoidance'.

2. Perspectives, which included the terms; 'experiences', 'voice', 'perspectives', 'views', 'perceptions', 'opinion' and 'attitudes'.

The search aimed to include literature which focused on both 'school non-attendance' and individuals' 'perspectives' therefore the directive 'and' was used to search for these areas in combination. A vast amount of research exists within this field so to ensure that a breadth of literature was accessed, several databases were searched to identify potentially relevant peer-reviewed journals, dissertations and theses: British Education Index, ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre); ETHOS (Electronic Theses Online Service) and PsycINFO. In addition, a range of individual journals were searched; Education Psychology in Practice and Educational Psychology Review. Government guidance documents regarding school attendance were also searched through The Department for Education (DfE) website. A detailed overview of the search strategy can be seen in the table below:

Database	Search Terms	Results	Refinement/ Comments	Relevant number
British Education Index	1. 'school non-attend*' or 'school absen*' or 'truan*' or 'school refus*' or 'school phobi*' or 'school avoid*'	331	Additional limits applied: After year 2000 Peer reviewed English only Abstract search	5
	2. perspective or view or attitude or opinion or experience or voice	84,696		
	3. Combine 1 and 2 with 'and'	98		
	4. secondary school or secondary education or secondary student or secondary chid or secondary pupil or key stage three or key stage four	49,490		
	5. Combine 3 and 4 with 'and'	36		
ERIC	1. 'school non-attend*' or 'school absen*' or 'truan*' or 'school refus*' or 'school phobi*' or 'school avoid*'	286		7
	2. perspective or view or attitude or opinion or experience or voice	16, 307		
	3. Combine 1 and 2 with 'and'	80		
ETHOS	1. "school attendance" or "school avoidance" or "school refusal" or "school	174	Any attempts to add an additional search term	11

	non-attendance" or "school phobia" or" school absence"		such as 'perspective, view' etc resulted in '0 records found' therefore title and abstract searching used to identify relevant articles.	
PsycINFO	1. 'school non-attend*' or 'school absen*' or 'truan*' or 'school refus*' or 'school phobi*' or 'school avoid*'	3712		36
	2. perspective or view or attitude or opinion or experience or voice	827506		
	3. Combine 1 and 2 with 'and'	579		
	4. Limit to adolescence (13y-17y) and English and after year 2000	177		

Table 8: Literature Search Strategy

Once search terms had been entered into the databases, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to identify appropriate articles. Inclusion criteria included articles that focused on 'school non-attendance'; pupils who were of secondary school age (11-18 years old) and those published after the year 2000. Exclusion criteria included articles that were not written in English. A full overview of the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied within the search strategy can be found in the table below:

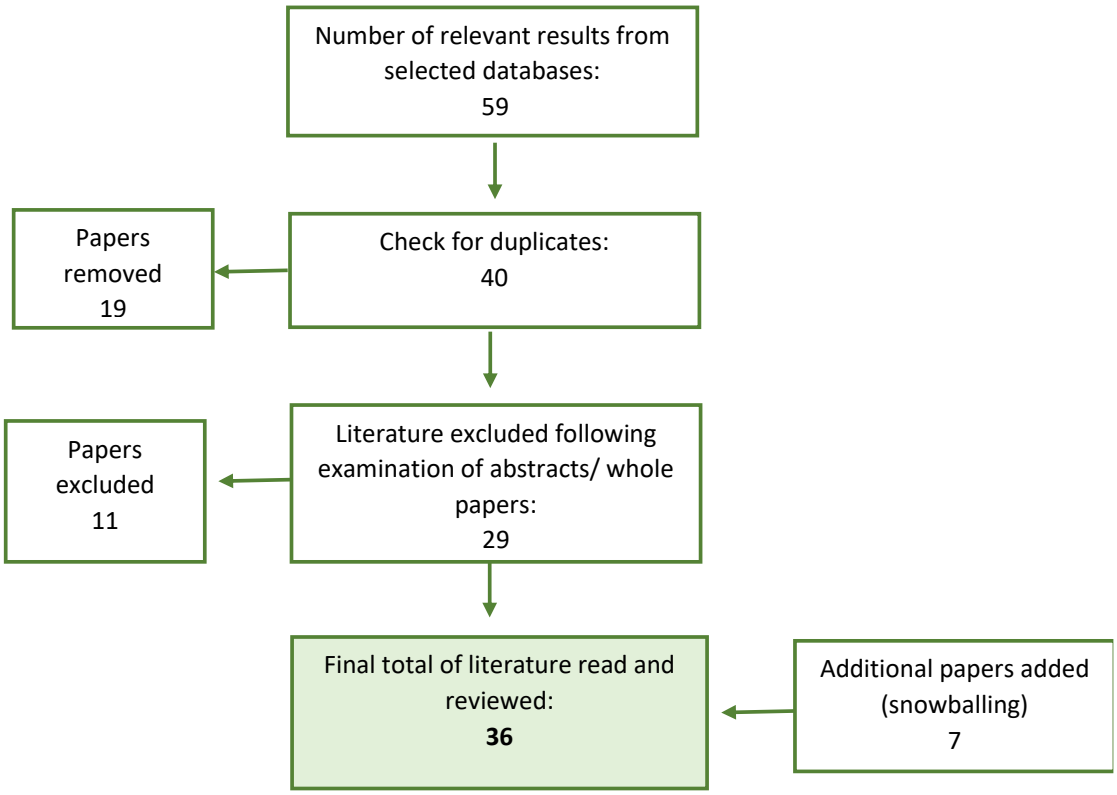
Inclusion	Exclusion
Study focuses on persistent school non-attendance (meeting broad range of criteria outlined by Tobias, 2019) Education-based studies Young people are school-aged (11-18) Post-2000 unless seminal Written in English Peer reviewed literature and book chapters Grey literature and theses Considers experiences, views and perceptions of pupil, parents or staff in relation to PSNA	Pupils are not secondary school aged (11-18) Pupils have been excluded by school Pupils are 'inpatients' as part of a clinical group (i.e. Linked with diagnoses of anxiety and depression) Study focuses on the attendance of teachers at school, on task avoidance rather than school avoidance, or on attendance of after school programmes Study focuses on promoting general school attendance rather than on individual pupils Pre-2000 unless seminal Not written in English A review of a book or article

Table 9: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Additional relevant articles that met the inclusion criteria were identified through the process of snowball reviewing, an approach whereby related records and reference lists are hand-searched to identify potentially relevant literature. The titles and abstracts of the remaining articles were examined for relevance to the research questions and those with limited relevance were removed,

alongside duplicates. 40 articles were read in full and 11 of these were also removed due to not meeting the inclusion criteria leaving 36 final papers. The quality of these remaining studies were then individually assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2013).

Figure? Visual representation of search strategy



Literature was excluded from the search for several reasons, including:

- Literature that focused on school non-attendance but did not represent views, experience or perspectives of pupils, families or professionals.
- Literature that focused on school non-attendance and pertained to experience or perceptions from primary aged participants.

One paper that did not meet the inclusion criteria was added (Aucott,2014). Although the participants were of primary school age this paper was deemed relevant for inclusion because of its findings shared perceptions between pupils, parents and professionals regarding PSNA.

Appendix B- Alternative Methodological Approaches Considered

Narrative Inquiry

The first approach considered was Narrative Inquiry, this methodology focuses on story-telling about a phenomenon and the meaning conveyed through such accounts (Gibson, Hugh-Jones, 2012). The approach is underpinned by the same interpretivist paradigm as AI and in line with this, knowledge is viewed as being co-constructed through language and interaction. I felt particularly drawn to the approach as it appeared in line with my personal believes and values regarding child voice and person-centred-practice. A narrative interview could have been utilized to provide participants with an opportunity to give detailed accounts of their experiences of PSNA and was thus considered to have the potential for illuminating pupils' voices on the topic. However, the present research focusses on a specific aspect of individual experience, that is, the school-related factors perceived to be contributing to attendance and therefore AI was considered to be more appropriate.

Case Study

A case study approach involves investigating "a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and in its real-world context" (Yin, 2014). This methodology has been linked with AI historically as an analysis tool (Hammond & Wellington, 2013). Case Studies are considered to be an appropriate methodology when seeking to explain why a social phenomenon works and thus was felt to be in line with research question 1 regarding the school-related factors pupils perceive contribute toward their attendance. However, AI was deemed to be more appropriate as an approach to explore the factors pupils felt could be different due to its links with transformation and specifically the Dream and Design stages of the 4-D Cycle which encourage participants to think about what could be different in the future and plan what would need to change to get there.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a structured approach which aims to look in detail at how individuals make sense of life experience and give a detailed interpretation of these accounts (Smith et al, 2009). This approach was considered due to its aim of getting close to participants' worlds in order to take an insider perspective (Smith, 2015). This was felt to be in line with the present research's theoretical underpinnings and my personal beliefs and values as a researcher and TEP regarding exploring the topic of PSNA from the view of pupils themselves. However, whilst the present research aims to explore the factors pupils perceived as contributing toward their school attendance it does not seek to understand their lived experiences of PSNA. In addition, whilst the current research does not aim to generalise participants' perspectives, the ideographical nature of the analysis of IPA was not felt to be the most appropriate methodology to select for drawing out themes or contributing to future change which the present research aims to achieve.

Appendix C- School Recruitment Letter

Jaime Smith
The University of Bristol
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8, 1TX
Js17893@Bristol.ac.uk
[redacted]

Dear

School-related factors which contribute towards attendance: what do pupils experiencing persistent school non-attendance feel helps them to attend?

My name is Jaime Smith and I am in my second year of training on the Educational Psychology Doctorate at the University of Bristol. I am currently completing a two-year placement with X Educational Psychology Service. As part of my doctoral training, I am conducting a piece of research which is due to be completed in September 2020.

I would like to invite some pupils from your school to take part and would appreciate it if you could take the time to read the information below:

Research Aims and Objectives
I am interested in finding out the perceptions of pupils experiencing persistent school non-attendance, regarding the school-related factors which they feel contribute towards their attendance. In order to explore this topic, I am looking to speak to pupils aged between 11-16 who have had an attendance rate of 80% or below for a least 6 months but who are deemed to be currently attending their education provision (on at least 4 occasions over the past month). I hope to interview between five and ten pupils in total.

This research aims to help us understand what is already working regarding the school-related factors which are helping pupils to attend and identify what changes pupils feel could be made to support an increase in their school attendance.

The research objectives are:

1. To identify the school-related factors which help pupils who have attendance rates of below 80% attend secondary school.
2. To identify what changes pupils feel could be implemented within their current school to increase their attendance.
3. To provide recommendations for future research and information to secondary school settings and Local Authorities regarding how to support pupils who experience persistent school non-attendance

What will be required of you if you agree to take part?
If you are interested in taking part in this research, I would be keen to discuss the project with you in more detail in person or over the phone so that you have a chance to ask questions. I would then ask that as a school you identify any pupils who meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants must be aged between 11-16
- The school attendance of the pupil must have been below 80% for a minimum of 6 months.
- They must have attended school on at least 4 occasions in the past month.

N.B the attendance percentage of 80% and below is being used to represent 'persistent school non-attendance' in this research. This is not a ridged definition and may be modified according to a pupils specific situation and school attendance criteria.

Once participants have been identified, their parents will be sent an information letter and consent form for themselves and, if they agree to take part, their child. If pupils from your school consent to take part, I would ask for a suitable space within school to be identified for individual pupil activities and interviews.

What will the participants be expected to do?

Participants will be asked to meet with me for three sessions over the course of approximately 4-8 weeks. The first session will involve a discussion of the research and an opportunity to ask questions. The second two sessions will involve a solution-focused interview aimed to elicit pupil views around positive past or present school experiences. Followed by an activity in which they will be asked to draw or write about their non-ideal and ideal school's.

How will the information collected be kept safe and confidential?

Participants will be given pseudonyms and these will be used throughout the research to ensure anonymity. The interviews will be recorded using an encrypted device, saved to a secure server and transcribed by the researcher before all recordings are deleted. All data collected will be treated with confidentiality, however, information which pupils disclose which puts themselves or others at risk of harm will be shared with the school's designated safeguarding lead. Data will be archived anonymously for 20 years and may be accessed by other researchers.

Can participants withdraw from the study?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and participants will have the right to withdraw their involvement and their data at any time without having to give a reason.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information. If you have any further questions or would like to express your interest please do not hesitate to contact me using the information below.

N.B: Approval for this research has been granted by the School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee.

Yours Sincerely

Jaime Smith
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Tel: [redacted]
Email: JS17893@Bristol.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints which cannot immediately be resolved, please contact my research supervisor, John Franey: John.Franey@bristol.ac.uk

Appendix D- Parental Recruitment Letter

Jaime Smith
University of Bristol
School for Policy Studies
Norah Cry Centre
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8, 1TX
Js17893@Bristol.ac.uk
[redacted]
www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry

Dear Parent/Carer

School-related factors which contribute towards attendance: what do pupils experiencing persistent non-school attendance feel helps them to attend?

My name is Jaime Smith and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Bristol. I am currently completing a two-year placement with Swindon Educational Psychology Service. As part of my doctoral training I am conducting a piece of research which is due to be completed in September 2020.

I am interested in finding out more about what schools can do to help increase the attendance of their pupils. In order to explore this topic, I am looking to speak to pupils aged between 11-16 who, despite finding attendance difficult are currently attending. In order to research this topic, I plan to use activities and a solution-focused interview to explore what school-related factors pupils feel helps them to attend and what changes school could make to help increase their attendance.

Your child has been identified as a pupil whose views could be helpful to this research and I am seeking your permission to meet with and talk to your child. I have included an information sheet with more details about the research, if you are interested in finding out more please read this and complete the expression of interest form if you would like me to contact you to discuss this further.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss any aspect of this study please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below:

Yours Sincerely

Jaime Smith
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Tel: [redacted]
Email: JS17893@Bristol.ac.uk

Appendix E- Pupil Recruitment Letter

Jaime Smith
The University of Bristol
8 Priory Road
Bristol, BS8, 1TX
Js17893@Bristol.ac.uk
[redacted]

Dear Pupil,

My name is Jaime Smith and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Educational Psychologists work with children and young people, families and schools to try and make learning easier and pupils feel happy at school. One of our jobs is to look at the things that schools can do to help children and young people feel happy to attend school.

I am doing some research to find out what things help pupils to attend school. We know that there are lots of reasons why pupils can find it difficult to go to school. You have been sent this letter because sometimes even though you might find going to school difficult you have still managed to attend some of the time. I would like to speak to you to find out how you have managed to keep attending and what changes you think school could make to help you to go to school more often. I hope to speak to between five and ten pupils in total.

I have attached an information letter with more details about the research in and if you decide to take part we can arrange to meet to talk about the research and answer any questions you might have. If you would like to take part please read the information letter and tell your parent(s)/carer(s) that you would like to take part. Then return the attached form to school or post it to me in the envelope.

Yours Sincerely

Jaime Smith
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Appendix F- Parental Information Letter, Consent and Expression of Interest Forms

Information Sheet

What is the research about?

There are many reasons why pupils can find it difficult to go to school. Some pupils stop attending school all together and for others these challenges can result in intermittent patterns of attendance. This research aims to capture the voices of pupils whose attendance has been intermittent but are still managing to attend school, to investigate the things that schools are already doing which help them to attend and identify any changes that could be made to the school environment to help make this a place where pupils want to attend more frequently.

The research will focus on the parts of school which your child has found positive in the past and present, this type of research is called 'appreciative' because it looks at the things that work well and what can be done to make things even better in the future.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been contacted because your child has been identified as a pupil who does not always attend school but who has not stopped attending.

Does my child have to take part?
Your child does not have to take part in this research. If they decide that they would like to find out more about the research and then change their mind that is okay too. If your child has started taking part, they can stop at any time without having to give a reason and request that I delete all of their information.

What will happen if I my child takes part?
If you are happy for your child to take part, I will speak to you on the phone to explain the research in more detail and answer any questions that you have. If your child wishes to take part we will agree a convenient time for me to meet with them either your home or school. I will meet with them for about 30-45 minutes and they can invite an adult to come with them. We will spend some time getting to know each other and I will tell them more about the research. They can ask me any questions they have.

What does taking part involve?
If your child decides that they would like to continue, we will meet for another two sessions. Each will last about 1 hour. In the first session, we will have a conversation about their most positive past or present school experiences, this will be in the form of an interview. Then we will talk about a school that they wouldn't want to attend, I will bring a big sheet of paper and we can write or draw on this to help their thinking. Next, we will talk about their 'ideal' school (the best school they can think of), we will use the big sheet of paper for this conversation too. In our second session, we will think about what could change in their current school to help it be more like their ideal school.

Will the interview be recorded?
I will use a digital voice recorder to record the conversations to help me remember our conversations when I type this up. I will save the recording onto a password-protected space on the university computer. I will type up the conversation before deleting the recording. I will change all of

the names of people and places from the conversation so that everyone remains anonymous. I will take a photograph of any drawing or writing your child did as part of the activities and will not put their name on these. They can keep the paper copies if they choose to.

What are the possible risks and disadvantages of taking part?
It is possible that your child might feel upset when telling me about school, but my questions are about what is working well not what isn't working. I will be able to refer them to your key person in school if they would like to talk about how they are feeling after our conversation. If they do not want to answer any of my questions that is okay.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
If your child chooses to talk part, they will help schools to understand what they can do to help pupils attend more frequently. This may help professionals to help other young people who have been in a similar situation to your child.

Will my child's involvement in this project be kept confidential and will they be anonymous?
All of the information your child shares will be kept confidential (that means it will not be shared with anyone else). I will use a pseudonym (a different name) when I write up the interviews to keep the conversation anonymous. Your child's real name or any other information which might identify them will be removed from the data. If they tell me about something illegal or which might put themselves or others at risk of harm I will pass this information on to the school safeguarding lead to help keep them safe.

What will happen with my child's information?
When the research has been completed, I will write a summary of the key findings which will be sent to you and the other families involved in the study. This will also be shared with the other Educational Psychologists at X council and your child's school.

Once your child's name and identifiable information has been removed from the data the interview transcripts (an anonymous record of our conversations) will be available for future use by researchers. The research will be written up and submitted to the University of Bristol as part of the course requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology. It is possible that a shorter version of the full research report will be published in an online journal once I have completed my qualification. A full copy of the research might also be available online. Your child will not be identifiable in any of this written work and the name of their school and other identifiable information will not be included in these reports.

Can my child ask for their data to be deleted at any time?

Yes your child can request that all of the information held about them deleted without giving a reason. Once their data has been anonymised it may, however, be impossible to delete this information.

What next?

If you have any further queries about this research or would like more information please contact me by email: JS17893@bristol.ac.uk or telephone: [redacted]. If you are interested in taking part in the research please complete the attached 'Expression of Interest' form and get in touch via one of the listed methods.

Thank you for your time,
Yours Sincerely,
Jaime Smith

Trainee Educational Psychologist
University of Bristol
Swindon Educational Psychology Service.

Should you have any further questions or concerns please get in touch with my research supervisors:
John Franey: john.franey@bristol.ac.uk
Jak lee: Jak.lee@bristol.co.uk

Expression of Interest Form

For parents and pupils who are interested in hearing more about the research project:

School-related factors which contribute towards attendance: what do pupils experiencing persistent school non-attendance feel helps them to attend?

Name of parent(s)/carer(s): ……

Name of child:……

Name of School: ……

Age and year group of child: ……

Please complete the below information so that the researcher can contact you:

Telephone number(s)……

Email address(s)……..

Address(es)……

……

How would you like to be contacted? ……

Please return this form in one of the following ways:

1. To a member of school staff
2. By Email to: JS17893@Bristol.ac.uk
3. Or call or text me on: [redacted]

Thank you for your interest in this research. I will be in touch soon.

For office use only
Pseudonym:

Parental Consent Form

School-related factors which contribute towards attendance: what do pupils experiencing persistent school non-attendance feel helps them to attend

Please tick the boxes to consent:

1. Taking part in the project

I have read and understood the study information sheet. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. ☐

I consent voluntarily for my child to take part in this study and understand that they can refuse to answer questions and withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. ☐

I agree to my child taking part in an audio-recorded interview with the researcher. I understand that only the researcher will listen to this interview and that this will be transcribed, anonymised and analysed by the researcher only. ☐

If my child decides to complete some pictures as part of the study activities, I agree that the researcher can take a photograph of these pictures. ☐

2. How my child's information will be used

I understand that my child's interview transcript will be presented within the researcher's doctoral thesis and that a written summary of the findings will be shared with all research participants. I understand that data may also be presented to other Educational Psychologists and school staff and published in an online journal. ☐

3. How the data will be kept anonymous and confidential

I understand that personal information collected about my child which can identify them, such as their name or where they live, will not be shared. I understand that all identifiable information will be removed from my child's interview transcript. I understand that the researcher might include anonymous direct quotes of my child's interview within research outputs and that as there are only a small number of participants, those people that know my child has participated in the research, may be able to recognise them. ☐

I understand that, in line with The Data Protection Act, data collected about my child will be stored in a password protected file on a University of Bristol computer. And that the anonymous information about my child will be kept safely at the University of Bristol for 20 years. ☐

4. Signatures

…….. …… ……

Name of parent(s)/carer(s): (in capitals) **Date:** **Signature:**

Name of child:……

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

…….. …….. ……..

Name of researcher: **Date:** **Signature:**

Appendix G- Pupil Information Letter and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet

What will happen if you take part in my project

If you choose to take part, I will visit you over three sessions. In the first session, we will spend some time talking about the research and I will answer any questions you might have. If you decide to take part, I will meet you for two more sessions where we will talk about your school experiences, do some activities together and I will ask you some questions.

I will record our conversations so that I can remember the important things you tell me until I have them written them down correctly, then this recording will be deleted. I will not use your name when I write my report and I will keep what you tell me very safe however if you do tell me something that puts you or others at harm then I will have to pass this on to your schools safeguarding lead to keep you safe.

You will get a letter explaining what I found out at the end of my project and how this may help other pupils.

What to do next?

If you are happy with the information above and want to take part, please put a tick in the boxes and sign your name on the consent form attached. This is your decision and no one will mind if you say no. You can also change your mind at any time.

Thank you,

Jaime Smith
Trainee Educational Psychologist

University of Bristol
Swindon Educational Psychology Service

For office use only

Child pseudonym:

Informed Consent for Pupils

School-related factors which contribute towards attendance: what do pupils experiencing persistent school non-attendance feel helps them to attend?

Please tick the boxes you agree with: ✓

1. Taking part in the project

I have read and understood the project information letter or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the project and I understand the answers.

I agree to take part in this project. I know that I do not have to take part and can change my mind at any time without saying why.

I agree to take part in a recorded interview (just sound not video) with Jaime. I understand that only Jaime will listen to my interview.

If I decide to complete some drawings as part of the project activities, I agree that Jaime can take a photograph of these drawings.

2. How my information will be used

I understand that my interview will be written about in Jaime's report without my name being used and that my drawings might be used. I understand that other Educational Psychologist and school staff might read the report.

I understand that a summary of the research findings will be sent to all of the pupils who have been interviewed. I understand that the report might be read online in the future.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.

3. How the data will be kept anonymous and confidential

I understand that Jaime will not use my name or any other information which might identify me when she writes about my interview.

I understand that Jaime might use direct examples of the things I have said when she writes about my interview. Because there are only a small number of people taking part, I understand that those people that know I have taken part might still be able to recognise me even though Jaime will not use my name.

I understand that any information about me will be kept safely on a computer file at the University of Bristol so that it can be used for future research and learning. I understand that the anonymous information about me will be kept safely at the University of Bristol for 20 years.

4. Signatures

My Name is: **(in capitals)**	**Date**	**Signature**
……..	……	……

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

……..	……..	……...
Name of researcher	**Date**	**Signature**

Appendix H- Interview Topic Guide

Topic Guide

Thank you for taking the time to meet today. As we discussed in our first meeting were going to complete some activities together and have a chat about the school-related factors which you feel help you to attend.

The interview is an appreciative interview which means that I'll be asking you questions about times when you felt things were working at their best. A lot of the time we focus on things that aren't working well, on the problems, so that we can fix them. But in this case, I want to focus on when things were working well so that we can find out how to do more of these things for other pupils in school. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the questions. I am interested in finding out more about you and your experiences.

Is that what you were expecting? Do you have any questions about that?

You don't have to answer all the questions I ask. If during our chat, I ask a question and you feel like you don't want to answer it, you can just say so and I'll move on to a different question. We can pause the interview at any time if you want to and we can stop it completely too and we don't have to carry on.

Are you happy to go ahead?

Activity 1- School attendance timeline

start audio recording

I would like to start by plotting your school experiences from as far back as you can remember to your current school on this timeline. If you can remember the years you started/ended we could add those in.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about the time you felt happiest at school?
(who/what helped make this such a positive experience?)
2. Can you tell me about your most positive school experience?
(who/what contributed to this positive experience?)
3. What are your favourite things about school? Why?
4. Can you tell me about the most important parts of school to you?/ the things you value the most?
5. Is there anyone or anything that helps you attend school?
6. When you are at school, is there anyone or anything that helps support you to stay at school?
7. Tell me about your own personal qualities that help you to attend school. How do these qualities help? How did you develop them?
8. Since being at school, you might have had some ups and downs. Can you tell me about a time that stands out when you felt most alive or proud of yourself?

Thank you, were going to move on to the next activity now

Activity 2: Ideal School Drawing

Think about a school you would not like to go to. This is not a real school. Make a quick drawing of this school in the middle of this paper (large A5 sheet)

1. Can you tell me three things about this school?
2. What kind of school is this?

Think about a school you would like to go to. This is not a real school. Make a quick drawing of this in the middle of the paper*

3. Can you tell me three things about this school
4. What kind of school is this?

Think about the sort of classroom you would like to be in. Make a quick drawing of this classroom in the school.

5. Can you tell me three things about this classroom?

Prompts: what would your lessons be like? What would your teacher be like? What would the pupils be like in your lessons?

Think about the sort of playground you would like. Make a quick drawing of this playground in the school.

6. Can you tell me three things about this playground?

Think about some of the pupils at the school you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of these pupils.

7. What are the pupils doing?
8. Can you tell me three things about these pupils?

Think about some of the adults at the school you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of some of these adults.

9. What are the adults doing?
10. Can you tell me three things about the adults?

Think about the school uniform in this school. Make a quick drawing of this.

- What are the uniform rules?
- Can you tell me three things about the uniform?

Think about the kind of school you would like to go to. Make a quick drawing of what you would be doing at this school.

11. Can you tell me three things about the way you feel at this school?
12. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your ideal school that we haven't already covered?

Activity 3- School Scaling

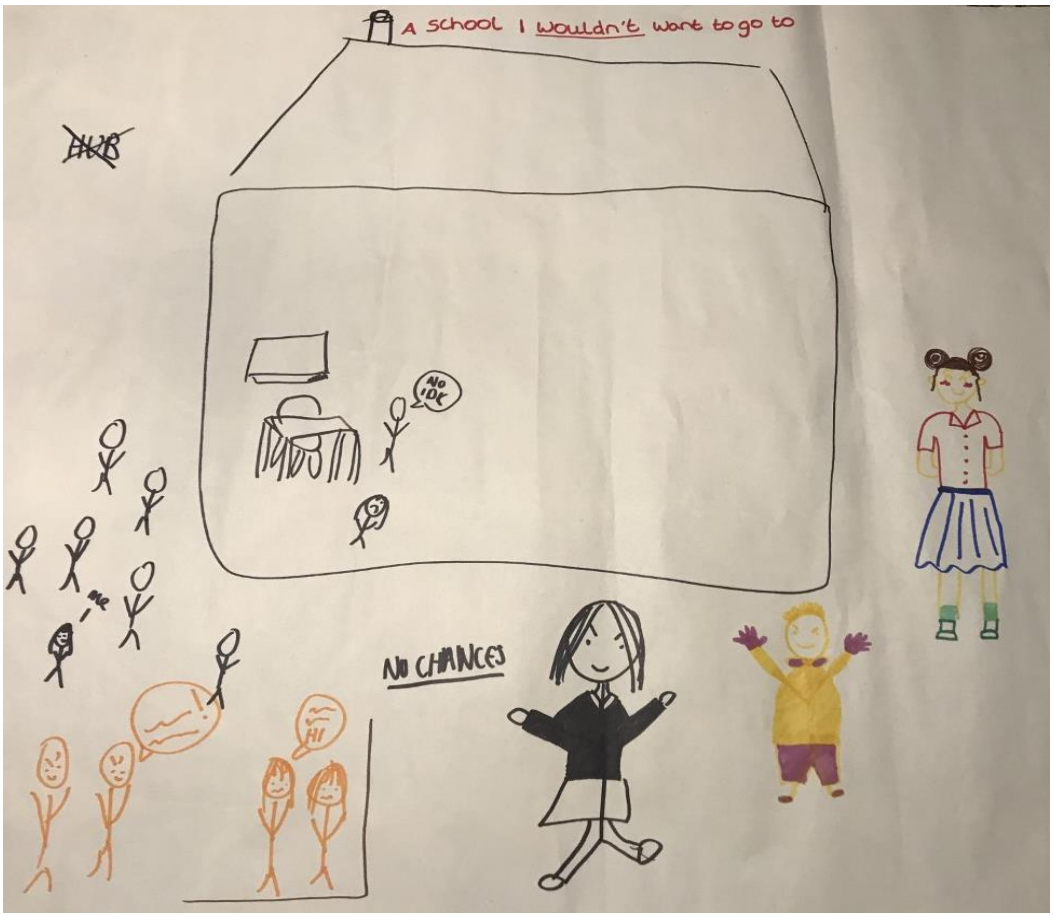
1. On a scale of 1-10 where 1 is the school you wouldn't want to attend and 10 is the ideal school, you described to be in our last session. Where would you score your current school?
2. Can you tell me a bit about why you gave it that score?
3. Can you tell me some of the reasons why you rating it… not 1 'worst school ever'?
4. Can you think of a time you would have given school an even higher rating? What was different then?
5. What would need to change in order to move your score up from.. to …?

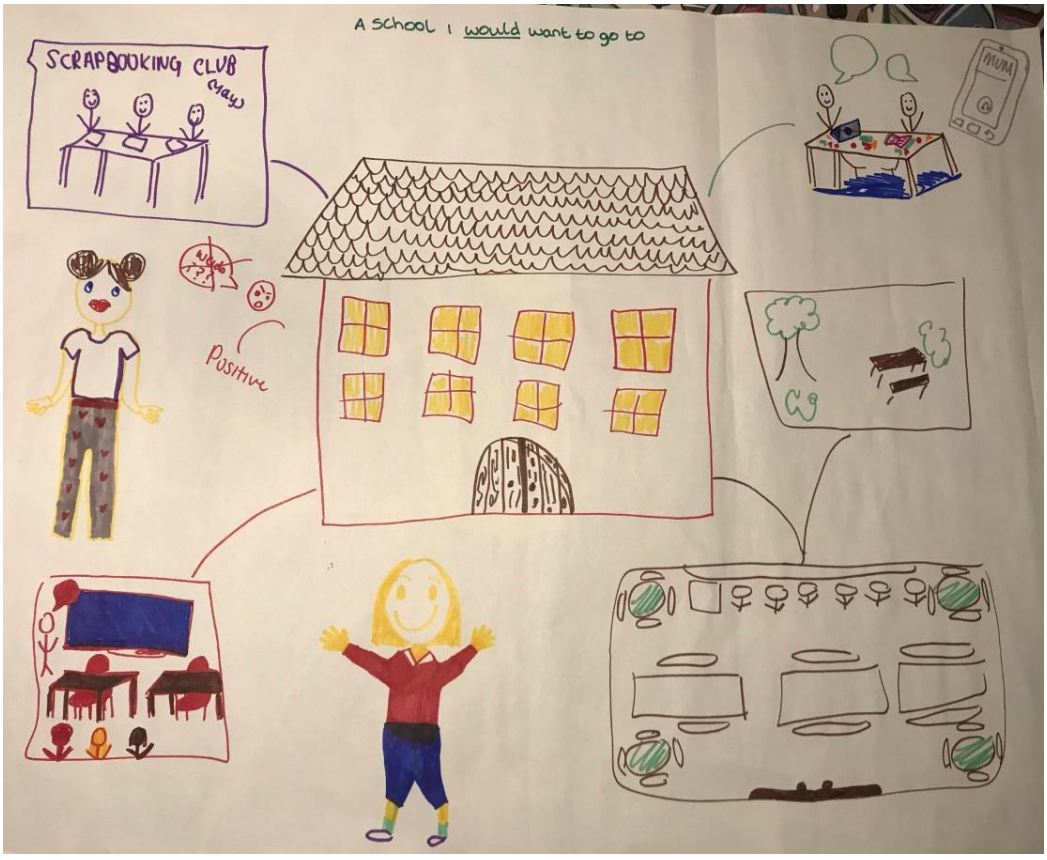
Prompts: What would be different about:
the school building?
the classrooms?
the playground?
the other pupils?
the other adults?
about you?
about the attendance procedures?
different about how you felt in school?

6. What three things would help you to attend school?
7. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about other changes that could be made to help make your school a place you would like to attend?

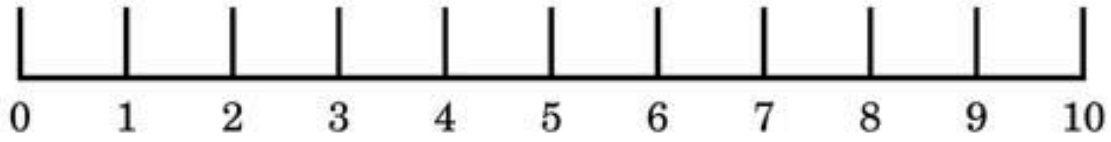
Is there anything else you think is important to talk about before we finish?

Appendix I- Example Ideal School Drawings





Appendix J- Example Scale



Non-Ideal School

Ideal School

Appendix K- Researcher One Page Profile

Jaime Smith; Trainee Educational Psychologist

What others like and admire about me?

- Positive
- Good listener
- Friendly
- Hard working
- Thoughtful
- Adventurous

What's Important to me?

- Spending time with my family and friends.
- Learning new things and visiting new places.
- Doing arts and crafts! -making greeting cards, photo albums and scrap books.
- Travelling and being outdoors especially walking and cycling in the countryside and by the sea.
- I love cooking (and eating!) food from around the world.
- Working with children, schools and families to support positive change.

How Best to Support Me?

- I like to work in a positive environment; a friendly smile can brighten up my day.
- I am sociable and enjoy working in a team. I find it useful to share my thoughts and concerns with others.
- Talking to the people I work with is important to me, it helps me manage difficult situations and improve the way I am working.
- I am motivated through my passion for working with young people and families to help them feel happy.

Email Address: *****

Appendix L- Steps to Thematic Analysis

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Analysis commenced by immersing myself in the data to ensure that I was familiar with the depth and breadth of its content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase began during transcription where audio recordings were listened to several times and verbatim accounts (transcript) were created. During transcription, verbal utterances were recorded in such a way as to be practically suited for the purpose of analysis, line with the requirements for TA, information felt to be important to the participants account were retained in a way deemed to be 'true' to its original nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006), for example, punctuation was used to add emphasis to meaning. Filler words which were not deemed to alter the meaning of the accounts such as 'umm' and 'like' were deleted:

> ***Researcher:*** So, thinking of a school that you wouldn't want to go to. Can you tell me three things about the school?
> ***Participant:*** ~~Umm~~... It's very crowded.
> ***Researcher:*** Okay,
> ***Participant:*** So, shall I daw some people.
> ***Researcher:*** So, it's very crowded, and for you what would 'very crowded' be like?
> ***Participant:*** well, I, my, my school is quite busy at some points and that's when I hate, ~~like,~~ because I'm very claustrophobic I have I'm a very claustrophobic person. And when it 'cause there's ~~like~~ pillars in our, in our school corridor, there's like little blocks. And if I have to line up behind one I'm just like, "Okay, this person, there's this person, there's this person, this person", and I'm just ~~like~~ really panicky about it, so it doesn't actually have to be that a lot of people it's just ~~like...~~that's quite crowded to me.

Transcripts were converted into tables electronically with space for comments. The next step involved repeated reading of participants' transcripts. Transcript were read in their entirety before coding began so that initial patterns and meanings within and between participant interviews could begin to be recognised and considered. Each transcript was then read for a second time in an 'active' way, with initial thoughts and questions noted as comments:

223.	spacious	***Participant:*** umm probably they'd be quite big, because then you're not like really close to other people and stuff.
224.		***Researcher:*** Yeah so the classroom and be bigger, so you're not too close to other people, why is it that you prefer that?
225.	concentration	***Participant:*** I'm not sure I kind of just like being a little bit further away from people, I guess I get less distracted. Like in Science I'm sat next my friends who sometimes I can get distracted and then like, I don't know what I'm doing. So I guess it would help to move away from people.
226.		***Researcher:*** good idea so you'd have a bit more space and the classroom be bigger, so that you're not sitting so close to friends and then you'd feel like you'd be less distracted.
227.		***Participant:*** Yeah.
228.		Okay and one other thing about an ideal classroom?
229.	Colorful	***Participant:*** Probably colourful, 'cause I really like colourful classrooms, it just seems like a happier environment and it just seems like it just seems nicer.
230.		***Researcher:*** Yeah, so a colourful environment makes you feel happier
231.		***Participant:*** Yeah
232.		***Researcher:*** Brilliant. Thank you. Um, what would your lessons be like in your ideal classroom? Can you tell me about your lessons?
233.	group work individual work level of understanding	***Participant:*** Well, they, they probably have like, you could do group work and stuff and then sometimes like individual work. Because sometimes if I don't completely get it I like doing group work, so that they can like help with what I'm doing or like, things like that, and sometimes I just don't want to do work and they....umm. But sometimes individual work because if you, if you don't, if you get it and you want to get on with it, if you could do individual work that would be nice.

Table 10: Phase 1 of TA-example transcript with comments

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

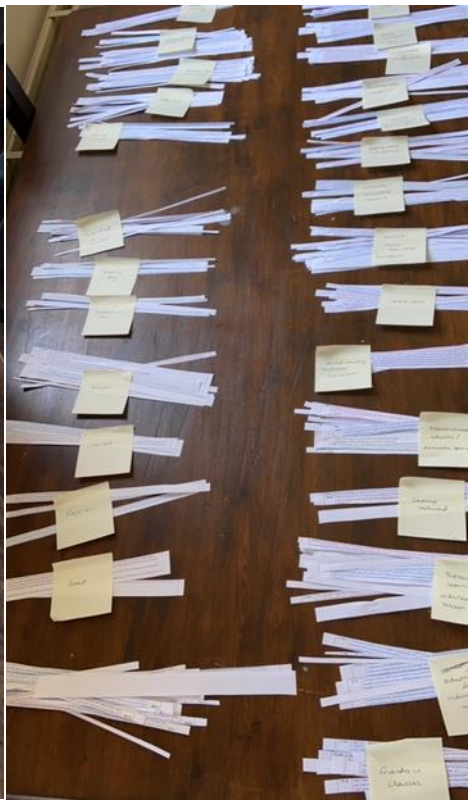
Transcripts were next read for a third time and initial codes were manually assigned to features of the data considered to relate to the research questions. Transcripts were converted into tables electronically with space for codes to be assigned. The entire data set was worked through systematically with full and equal attention being paid to each data item. Once coding was complete, the data set was read for a fourth time in its entirety, in a different order so that codes which had been identified in later transcripts could be considered. Code labels evolved throughout the process, a code diary was used to record these changes and on the fourth read-through attempts were made to make these uniform for clarity.

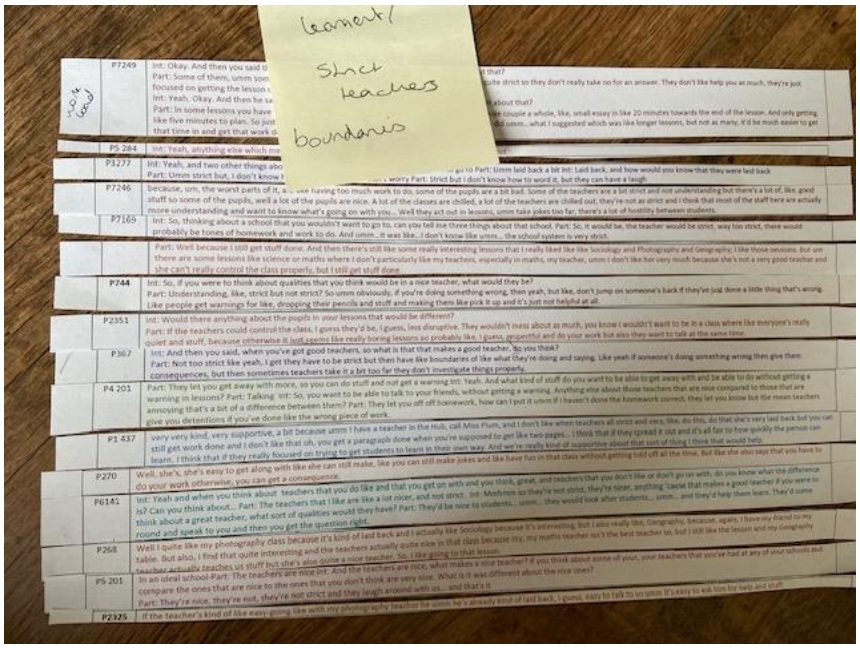
17.		***Researcher:*** Okay, so if primary school was a time when you think you felt most happy, can you think of a particular occasion or memory that you have from primary school where you felt really happy?
18.		***Participant:*** Well,I I I have like, and I know you said time but I really enjoyed year six. I know that that's like quite a lot of time...
19.		***Researcher:*** That's fine!
20.	*Relationship with teacher* *Having friends in school* *Sense of community*	***Participant:*** But even though there was SATS and like the pressure of them, they were towards the end of the year. And there was this, well the teacher that I had was, really lovely and she was so nice and. And my best friend was in the other classroom, but the thing is in our primary school in year six, I don't know if it's the same in any other places. But you, you kind of merge together. So, we, we basically weren't, it wasn't *Mrs Mills class and *Mr Williams class, it was both of them.
21.		***Researcher:*** Okay
22.	*Feeling comfortable in school* *Feeling understood* *Individual needs being met*	***Participant***: So, a lot of the time I could go in, cuz obviously cuz obviously I did have quite a bit of anxiety back then, not as bad as it is now. I could go and say oh can I do maths in that classroom? and they would just say yes,
23.		***Researcher:*** Okay
24.		***Participant:*** because sometimes they like would rearrange the groups of certain like subjects
25.		***Researcher:*** Yeah
26.	*Being treated unfairly* *Feeling cared for*	***Participant:*** But it wasn't like if you were late to the lesson, then they would tell you off, it's just like they would wonder where you were, make sure that you weren't in trouble and stuff. But I feel like now it's just like, you're late, you get a warning, you're, you're in trouble.
27.		***Researcher:*** Okay
28.	*Time between lessons* *Strategies to avoid lateness*	***Participant:*** I mean, I haven't experienced that myself but because I'm just so like, Okay, I've got to be ready for when the bell goes, because I'm very like conscious about when I'm gonna have to leave.
29.		***Researcher:*** Yeah.
30.	*Relationship with adults in school* *Family connections* *Physical contact* *Feeling cared for* *Feeling safe*	***Participant:*** But so, I really enjoyed year six, and there was a Teaching Assistant that my sister because she suffered with anxiety in primary school and she helped *Laura and my sister before that who went to Primary School as well. So, she knew my mum really well. We were really close and she would like hug me every day and, and it was really nice. So, and she was in my classroom all the time.

Table 11: Phase 2 of TA- example coded transcript

Phase 3: Searching for themes

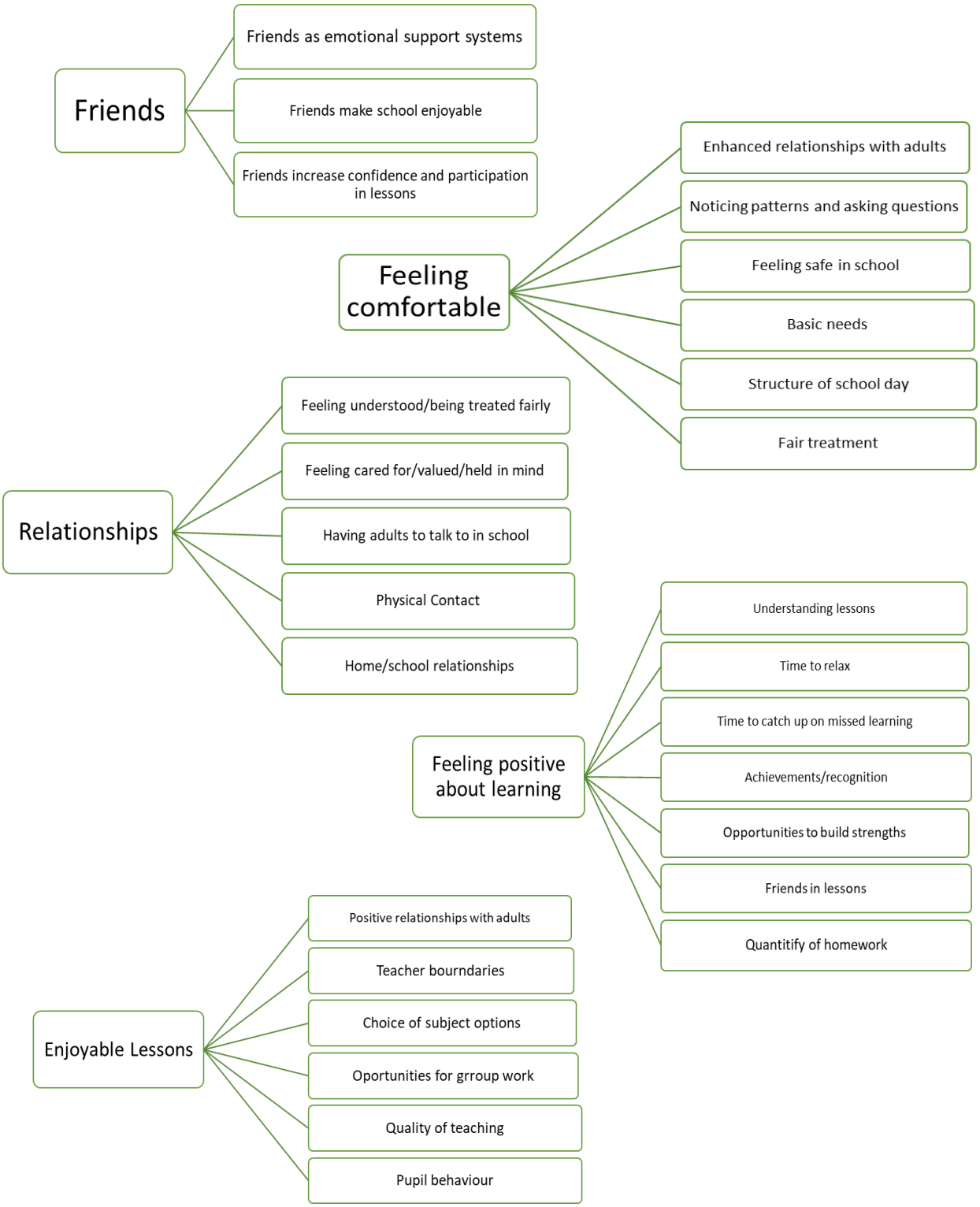
The process of searching for themes began by the printing of transcript tables. These were manually cut into strips comprising an aspect of the data and the initial code which had been assigned. Strips were collated together by code and read to check for heterogeneity of meaning. Code names were reworded and coded transcript sections moved between groups based upon this process of reading, meaning-making and comparing with other data strips. Clusters of codes were analysed to consider how they may be combined to form overarching themes and coded transcripts were moved to form new piles which were labelled using Post-It Notes. A miscellaneous pile was created to house codes which did not seem to belong to the themes being created.





Initial superordinate and subordinate themes were recorded and Initial thematic maps were created to provide visual support for this process:

Figure? Phase 3 of TA: initial thematic map



Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

Each initial theme was reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity to ensure they cohered together meaningfully and were clear and distinct from other themes. Themes which did not have sufficient data to support them were removed or collapsed into others and large themes were broken down into subthemes. The entire data-set was then read and reviewed one final time to consider if the identified thematic maps addressed the research questions and reflected the content of the data.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes and phase 6: Writing up

One confident that the thematic map was a 'good fit' for the data, theme names were finalised which were felt to capture the essence of the theme and a final thematic maps were created (as represented in 4.3 an 4.5 of the main body of this thesis). Theme tables were created and all quotes from each participant pertaining to each theme were copied and pasted into these tables (participants transcripts were colour-coded so that quotes pertaining to each participant were clearly recognisable):

	Participant: Well I liked my teacher and... duno we didn't have to do as much homework.
P4445	Researcher: Okay. Um, and what, three things. So, thinking about anything at all. What three things would help you to attend school? Participant: If I had like different teachers, that I could actually get along with.
P544	Participant: And I like the teachers Researcher: and the teachers so you like your teachers as well. What is it you like about them that you like? Participant: One of them is funny. Researcher: Yeah, one of those funny. And the other one, can you think what is he like about them? Participant: They're just nice
P568	Researcher: Makes you laugh and makes you happy, and then is there anybody at school, that helps you to get to school, you think well I'm going to see this person or that person. Participant: Mr Stevens Researcher: Yeah, Mr Stevens and what does he do that's helpful? Participant: I duno
3P527	So, they still expect you to come in when you're really poorly and then you're going to spread the germs around school.
P6 25	The teachers were nice and we did fun stuff, and we always just have golden time.
P6109	Mr. Stevens (attendance co-ordinator). He calls my mum and says can I go in and then normally I'll go in, unless I've been sick and then I don't go in… He normally meet me if I go in, he normally makes me down reception. And then, and then I'll go into his office and sit down…If I miss, like the first, if it's like 20 minutes or less for the first lesson then I sit on his desk and normally do homework and then I'll go back to class for the second one.
P6372	Because the staff is nice.
P740	Well, I guess Primary because it's they're not, they're more focused on the students rather than how the school looks… It's just, it's usually the teacher a lot nicer, they're not on your back all the time because well you're primary, you're not expected to do loads of work, they understand if you're having a hard time. The umm…the teacher is nicer in general.

Table 12: Phase 4 of TA- example theme table

Phase 6- Writing up

The final stage of TA involved presenting the five established themes using data excepts and analytic commentary. To ensure all participants voices were represented within this thesis, quotes from each of the seven participants were selected within the presentation of findings. A breakdown of the themes in relation to each research question with supporting quotes can be seen below:

Research Question	Superordinate Theme	Subtheme	Extract Example
RQ 1 What are the perceptions of pupils experiencing PSNA regarding the school related factors which contribute toward their attendance?	The importance of relationships	Approachable and available adults	***Lilly:*** *'if they're easy to talk to it's easier to go through the lesson, for shy people like me it's easier to talk to them and ask them for help and stuff, like really easy going and nice'*
		Having someone to talk to	***Simon:*** *'Well, they're quite encouraging, the friends that I have, they understand what's going on, they want to help me.'*
		Friends increase school enjoyment	***Megan:*** *'I'm just happy because I know that I've got people there with me, that I get along with and I just feel comfortable.'*
		Feeling known, valued and understood	***Emma:*** *'I think that, how everyone in there kind of knows how you feel..., because they work with people with like anxiety, depression like anorexia and stuff like that and there just really caring.'*
	Positive learning experiences	Friends increase understanding and participation	***Lilly:*** *' I feel like if I'm with my friends, easier to kind of understand what's going on'*
		Engaging and enjoyable lessons	***William:*** *'there's some days I don't feel like I can be bothered. Like when I have an awful day, like lessons. When you've got like, DT, English, Science, Music and then I just don't want to come in 'cause I've got awful day'.*
		Boundaried and Laid-Back Teaching Style	***Emma:*** *'I think that if you still have a little bit of a boundary it might be quite a lot better than having everyone mess around the whole lesson.'*
		Meeting individual needs	***Lilly:*** *'she has the board of like what we're doing is kind of a bit more detailed, but then she explains it as well like um like more kind of like more simplified so that were sure what we're doing.'*
RQ 2 What changes do pupils feel could	Enhanced positive relationships	Increased access to approachable trusted adults	***Lilly:*** *'Some of the teachers who are part of it, they're upstairs and at lunch, you're not allowed to go upstairs in the wings.'*
		Understanding individual need	***Frankie****: 'the teachers are mostly horrible, there's only a few teachers in this school who understand me'*

be implemented to increase school attendance?		Understanding reasons for PSNA	**Ava:** *' they still expect you to come in when you're really poorly and then you're going to spread the germs around school.'*
		Being treated fairly	***Megan:*** *'if someone's doing something wrong then give them consequences, but then sometimes teachers take it a bit too far they don't investigate things properly.'*
	Enhanced positive learning experiences	Increased opportunity for group work	***Simon:*** *'move the tables around a bit more so you can actually help each other a bit more'*
		Manageable workload	***Frankie:*** *'at our school we get about 15 bits each week! And it's hard to fit all that in alongside my training and things.'*
	Feeling comfortable in school	Physiological needs	***Megan:*** *'I was so hungry and then when I was in my next lessons, I was moody and it's embarrassing because if the class is quiet and your stomach is grumbling it's annoying.'*
		Feeling safe	***Emma:*** *'I feel very intimidated, a lot of the time by students that are all popular and like "I'm so cool" and I'm just like "I'm so scared".'*
		Physical comfort	***Simon:*** *'cuz we're sitting down pretty much for six hours of the day and if were in hot stuffy uniforms it's just not very nice or comfortable'.*
		Self-expression and self-esteem	***Megan:*** *'sometimes when people don't really want to come to school is because of how they look, because I haven't wanted to come to school before because I normally feel comfortable when I wear makeup.'*

Table 13: Themes in relation to research question with supporting quotes

Appendix M-Example Pupil Letter

*Dear *Ava,*

Thank you again for taking part in my research project which aims to explore the school-related factors which contribute toward attendance. I will send you a copy of the full Research report once this is completed but, in the meantime, wanted to share with you a summary of some of the views and experiences that you shared with me over the course of our sessions:

You told me that you feel happiest at school when:

- You have classes with your friends and can sit next to them. You feel it's easier to take part in lessons when you're with your friends because you feel more confident.
- You are studying subjects which you find interesting like Sociology and Photography.
- You get along with your peers.
- When teachers are easy to get along with, let you make jokes and have fun in their lessons as long as you're getting the work done.
- When you get high grades you feel proud of yourself.

The things that help you to attend school include:

- Your mum encouraging you to attend but being understanding about when this feels too difficult rather than being forceful.
- When your friends are in school, sometimes you find it more difficult to attend when friends aren't in your lessons because you don't like the class without them.
- Wanting to make your mum happy and not 'get her in trouble'.
- Wanting to pass your GCSEs.

You would find it easier to attend school if:

- There were more options to pick from like Psychology as you are interested in working in this area in the future.
- If teachers were more 'laid-back' and easier to talk to like your Photography teacher.
- If you had longer for lunch and there was a better selection of food options to choose from.
- You could wear your clothes from home. You feel more motivated to work when you feel comfortable.
- The school environment was brightly coloured with plants and flowers which would make you feel happier.
- If more classrooms had help sheets up on the walls so you could find the answers to your questions without having to ask the teacher.
- If you could have a mixture of individual and group work and more opportunities to work with your friends.
- If teachers were more understanding and would explain things calmly without getting angry.
- If there were less homework, things would feel less stressful.
- If there were more teachers available who you feel comfortable talking to about your worries or problems. It is important to you that these teachers are based in an accessible part of the school building.

It really was an absolute pleasure to meet you and thank you for providing such beautiful art-work which will help to illustrate the themes and quotes within the results section of my Thesis!

Wishing you all the very best for the future,
Jaime Smith

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